

IVAN

A Story

I intended to check the light, and giving orders to wake me at 0400, I turned out after eight.

I was awakened, or, better, harassed—the hands of the lamp-boss had pointed in five minutes.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant... Comrade Senior Lieutenant!" Someone was shaking me hard by the shoulder. In the dim light of the lamp glimmering on the table I saw Lance-Corporal Vasyev of the outpost platoon. "We've detained a fellow here. The junior lieutenant told me to bring him to you."

"Turn the light up!" I ordered, and swore to myself. Surely they could have handled this man myself without bothering me.

Vasyev turned the wick up, that faced round to me and departed.

He was crawling about in the water near the bunk. Refused to give any explanation, and demanded to be taken down to the quartermen. He won't answer any questions. Says he'll only speak to the commanding officer. Looks downy, but maybe he's only kidding. The junior lieutenant ordered me to bring him here.

I swung my feet over the side of the bunk and sat up rubbing my eyes. Vasyev, a burly fellow, stood in front of me, staring slowly from his sodden caps.

The burning wick illuminated the sandy dugout, and right by the door I saw a thin boy of about eleven, all blue and shivering with cold. His wet shirt and trousers clung to his body, his feet were soaked with mud up to the ankles. The sight of him made me shiver.

Go and stand by the stove, I told him. "Who are you?" He came forward and stared at me with a hard, glazed look of his large wide-set eyes. He had prominent cheekbones, and

I

I intended to check the outposts that night, and giving orders to wake me at 0400, I turned in a little after eight.

I was awakened earlier, however—the hands on the luminous dial pointed to five minutes to one.

“Comrade Senior Lieutenant... Comrade Senior Lieutenant!” Someone was shaking me hard by the shoulder. In the dim light of the lamp glimmering on the table I saw Lance-Corporal Vasilyev of the outpost platoon. “We’ve detained a fellow here. The junior lieutenant told me to bring him to you.”

“Turn the light up!” I ordered, and swore to myself. Surely they could have handled this themselves without bothering me.

Vasilyev turned the wick up, then faced round to me and reported:

“He was crawling about in the water near the bank. Refused to give any explanation, and demanded to be taken down to headquarters. He won’t answer any questions. Says he’ll only speak to the commanding officer. Looks done up, but maybe he’s only kidding. The junior lieutenant ordered me to bring him here.”

I swung my feet over the side of the bunk and sat up rubbing my eyes. Vasilyev, a burly fellow, stood in front of me, water dripping slowly from his sodden cape.

The burning wick illumined the spacious dugout, and right by the door I saw a thin boy of about eleven, all blue and shivering with cold. His wet shirt and trousers clung to his body; his bare feet were caked with mud up to the ankles. The sight of him made me shiver.

“Go and stand by the stove,” I told him. “Who are you?”

He came forward and stared at me with a fixed guarded look of his large wide-set eyes. He had prominent cheekbones, and

his face was dark-grey with the dirt that had eaten into the skin. His wet hair hung down in tufts. There was a strained, suspicious and hostile look in his peaked face with its tightly compressed blue lips.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

"Tell him to go out," the boy murmured through chattering teeth, motioning to Vasilyev with his eyes.

"Put some more wood in and wait outside," I ordered Vasilyev.

Leisurely, so as to prolong his stay in the warm dugout, he raked the stove, filled it with short billets, and slowly went out. Meanwhile, I had pulled on my boots and was looking expectantly at the boy.

"Well, why don't you speak? Where do you come from?"

"I'm Bondarev," he said quietly in such a tone of voice as if the name meant something and explained everything. "Notify staff headquarters, Number Fifty-One, at once that I am here."

"I see!" I couldn't help smiling. "And then what?"

"That's their business. They know what to do."

"Who are 'they'? What staff headquarters have I got to notify and who's Fifty-One?"

"Army headquarters."

"And who's Fifty-One?"

He did not answer.

"The staff of which army do you need?"

"Military post forty-nine five-five-o."

Unerringly he had given the number of the military post of our army staff. No longer smiling, I looked at him in surprise, wondering what it was all about.

The dirty shirt reaching to his hips and the short narrow trousers were old country-cut garments of coarse cloth, probably homespun, for all I know. He spoke correctly, however, with the noticeable accent of a Muscovite or a Byelorussian. Judging by his speech he was a town-bred boy.

He stood in front of me sniffing and shivering, eyeing me with a scowling, guarded look.

"Take your things off and give yourself a rub down. Snap into it!" I ordered, handing him a towel that had seen cleaner days.

He pulled off his shirt, exposing a thin body with the ribs showing through and dark with dirt. He glanced at the towel dubiously.

"That's all right, use it. It's dirty."

He started to rub his chest, back and arms.

"Take your trousers off, too," I ordered. "You're not shy, are you?"

After a silent struggle with the damp knot, he untied the tape that served as a belt and threw off his trousers. He was quite a child yet, with narrow shoulders and thin legs and arms. He did not look more than ten or eleven, at most, although, judging by his sullen face with its look of unchildlike concentration, and his crinkled forehead, one would not give him less than thirteen. He picked up his shirt and trousers and tossed them into a corner by the door.

"Who's going to dry them for you?" I said.

"They'll bring me all I need."

"Is that so?" I said doubtfully. "Where are your clothes, then?"

He did not answer. I was about to ask him for his identity papers, when it suddenly dawned on me that he was too young to have any.

From under the bunk I got out an old quilted jacket belonging to my batman, who was at the battalion aid post. The boy stood by the stove with his back to me. A large birthmark, the size of a five-kopec coin, stood out darkly between his angular shoulder-blades. Slightly above the right shoulder-blade there was a red scar, the result of a bullet wound, as far as I could tell.

"What's that on your back?"

He looked at me over his shoulder, but said nothing.

"I'm asking you—what's that on your back?" I said, raising my voice as I handed him the jacket.

"It's none of your business. And don't you shout at me!" he answered resentfully, his green eyes blazing like a cat's. Nevertheless, he took the jacket. "Your business is to report that I am here. The rest does not concern you."

"Don't teach me!" I shouted, somewhat ruffled. "You don't seem to understand where you are and how to behave. Your name doesn't tell me anything. Until you tell me who you are and where you come from and what you were doing down by the river, I shan't stir a finger."

"You'll answer for it!" his voice held a threat.

"Don't try to frighten me—you're not big enough. And this game of silence won't get you anywhere. Seriously now, where are you from?"

He wrapped the jacket around him—it came down almost to his ankles—and turned his face away, saying nothing.

"You'll sit here all day, three days, five days, but until you tell me who you are and where you come from I'm not going to report you anywhere!" I declared flatly.

He looked at me coldly and turned away again.

"Are you going to speak?"

"You must report at once to Fifty-One at staff headquarters that I am here," he repeated doggedly.

"I don't *must* anything," I said irritably. "And until you explain who you are I shall do nothing. Now put that in your pipe and smoke it. Who's Number Fifty-One anyway?"

He maintained a surly silence.

"Where are you from?" I demanded, barely able to control my rising anger. "You've got to tell me if you want me to report about you."

After a long pause of tense reflection, he squeezed out through his teeth:

"From the other side."

"The other side?" I couldn't believe it. "How did you get here, then? How can you prove you are from the other side?"

"I am not going to prove it. I'm not going to say anything more. You have no right to question me—you'll answer for it. And don't say anything on the phone either. The only one who knows I'm from the other side is Fifty-One. You must report to him at once that Bondarev is here. That's all. They'll send for me," he shouted.

"Still, maybe you'll explain who you are to have them sending for you?"

He was silent.

I studied him for a while, thinking hard. His name told me nothing at all, but they might possibly know about him at army staff headquarters. The war had taught me not to be surprised at anything.

He looked miserable and worn out, but bore himself with an air of independence, and spoke to me in a tone of assurance, I would even say authority. He did not ask, he demanded. His grim, frowning air of unchildlike concentration and watchfulness produced a very odd impression. His statement that he had come from the other side struck me as being a barefaced lie.

I had no intention, of course, of reporting directly to army headquarters about him, but it was my duty to report to regimental HQ. I figured that they would send for him and go into the matter themselves. I'd be able to get an hour or two's sleep before going out to check the outposts.

I turned the handle of the telephone and called regimental HQ.

"Hullo, Number Three here," I heard the voice of Captain Maslov, the Chief of Staff.

"Comrade Captain, this is Number Eight reporting. I have Bondarev here. Bon-da-rev! He demands that we should report to 'Volga' about him."

"Bondarev?" Maslov queried. "What Bondarev is that? Not the major from O.P.D. on a check up, surely? What's he doing at your place?" Maslov fired off his questions, obviously disturbed.

"No, not the major. I don't know who he is myself—he doesn't want to speak. Demands I should report to 'Volga', Number Fifty-One, that he's here with me."

"And who's Number Fifty-One?"

"I thought you knew."

"We haven't got 'Volga's' call signs. Only divisional. What's his job, Bondarev's, and what's his rank?"

"He has no rank," I couldn't help smiling as I said it. "He's a boy, you see, a boy of about twelve."

"Are you trying to be funny? Whose leg are you trying to pull?" Maslov roared into the telephone. "What's this, a circus show? I'll show you a boy! I'll report it to the Major! Are you drunk, or you've got nothing else to do? I'll—"

"Comrade Captain," I shouted, flabbergasted at the turn things had taken. "Comrade Captain, I give you my word of honour it's a boy. I thought you knew about him..."

"Well, I don't and I don't want to know!" Maslov shouted angrily. "And don't you bother me with trifles. I'm not a kid to be made game of! I'm up to my ears in work, and..."

"But I thought..."

"Thought, your grandmother!"

"Very good! Comrade Captain, but what should I do with the boy?"

"How did he get there?"

"He was detained on the bank by our outpost."

"What was he doing on the bank?"

"From what I can gather..." For a moment I hesitated. "He says he's from the other side."

"Flew in on a magic carpet, I suppose? The fellow talks out of his hat, and you swallow it all. Put him under guard!" he ordered. "And if you can't handle this thing yourself, turn him over to Zotov. It's their job, anyway, let them do it."

"Tell him if he doesn't stop shouting and doesn't report at once to Fifty-One, he'll answer for it," the boy suddenly said in a loud incisive tone.

But Maslov had put down the receiver, and I slammed mine down, too, annoyed with both the boy and Maslov.

The fact of the matter was that I was only temporarily fulfilling the duties of battalion commander, and everyone knew that I was a "temporary". What's more, I was only twenty-one, and, naturally, I was treated differently from other battalion commanders. Whereas the regimental commander and his assistants were careful not to show it, Maslov—incidentally, himself the youngest of my regimental superior officers—made no bones about the fact that he regarded me as a boy and treated me accordingly, although I had been fighting since the early months of the war and had wounds and awards.

Maslov, of course, would not have dared to speak to the commander of the First or Third battalions in such a tone. With me it was different. He had gone up in the air without knowing what it was all about. I was sure that he was wrong. Nevertheless, I said to the boy, not without malicious glee:

"There, you asked me to report you, and I did. I've got orders to put you under guard," I lied. "Satisfied now?"

"I told you to report to Fifty-One at army headquarters, but you didn't."

"You 'told' me! I can't apply to army headquarters over the heads of my superiors."

"Let me ring them up then," the boy said, his hand shooting out of the jacket and grasping the receiver.

"Don't you dare! Who are you going to phone at army headquarters?"

He was silent for a while, still gripping the receiver, then muttered sullenly, "Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov."

Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov was Army Intelligence Chief. I knew him not only by hearsay, but personally.

"How do you know him?"

Silence.

"Who else do you know at army headquarters?"

Silence again, then a swift sullen glance and a muttered: "Captain Kholin."

Kholin, an officer in Army Intelligence Section, was known to me too.

"How do you come to know them?"

"Let Gryaznov know at once that I'm here," the boy

demanding, ignoring my question. "If you don't, I will."

I took the receiver from him, and after a moment's reflection, turned the handle. I was put through to Maslov again.

"Number Eight again, Comrade Captain. Please hear me out," I said firmly, trying to control my agitation. "It's about this Bondarev again. He knows Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov and Captain Kholin."

"How does he come to know them?" Maslov asked wearily.

"He doesn't say. I think this ought to be reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov."

"If you think so, then report it," Maslov said indifferently. "You're always worrying your superiors with all kinds of nonsense. Personally, I see no reason for bothering headquarters, and at night of all times. It's not done!"

"Allow me to phone them, then?"

"I'm not allowing anything, and don't drag me into this. On second thoughts, you can ring up Dunayev. I've just been speaking to him, he's not sleeping."

I rang up Major Dunayev, Chief of Divisional Intelligence, and told him that I had Bondarev here, and that he wanted us to report him at once to Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov.

"Okay," Dunayev interrupted me. "I'll report and ring you back."

Two minutes later the phone buzzed sharply.

"Number Eight? 'Volga' on the line," said the telephone operator.

"Galtsev? Hullo, that you?" I recognised the deep gruff voice of Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov. It was a familiar voice to me. Gryaznov had been our Divisional Chief of Intelligence until the summer, and I was liaison officer at the time. I came in touch with him very often. "Is Bondarev with you?"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel."

"Good boy!" For the moment I couldn't make out whether he meant me or the boy. "Now listen to me carefully. Chuck everybody out of the dugout. Don't let anybody see him or bother him. No questions, and no talk about him. Get me? Give him my regards. Kholin is going out to pick him up. He'll be down in about three hours, I should think. Meanwhile, see that he has everything he needs. Treat him with tact, he's a touchy kid, you know. First of all, give him paper and ink or a pencil. Send his message to regimental HQ in a sealed envelope by a reliable messenger. I'll give orders to have it forwarded on to me immediately. Make him comfortable and don't bother

him. Give his some hot water to wash in and something to eat. Let him get some sleep. He's our chap. Get me?"

"Yes," I answered, although many things still puzzled me.

* * *

"Have something to eat?" was my first question.

"Later on," the boy murmured without looking up.

I then put some paper, envelopes, ink and pen on the table, went outside and ordered Vasilyev to his post, then came back again and shut the door.

The boy was sitting on the edge of the bench with his back to the red-hot stove. The wet trousers, which he had thrown into a corner, now lay at his feet. From a pinned pocket he pulled out a dirty handkerchief, unfolded it and shook out onto the table an assortment of wheat and rye grains, sunflower seeds and pine and fir needles, which he arranged in separate little heaps. Then, with an air of great concentration, he counted the contents of each heap and wrote it down on the paper.

At my approach he quickly turned over the sheet of paper and darted a hostile glance at me.

"I'm not looking, don't you worry," I said hastily.

I phoned the battalion headquarters and gave orders for two pails of water to be heated immediately and brought down to my dugout together with a wash pot. I caught a note of surprise in the sergeant's voice as he repeated the order back to me. I told him I wanted to have a wash. As it was half past one in the morning, he must have thought, like Maslov, that I had had a drop too much or was off my nut. I also gave orders for Tsarivny, a smart soldier from the Fifth Company, to get ready to deliver a message to regimental headquarters.

While speaking on the telephone, I stood sideways to the table and saw, out of the corner of my eye, that the boy had ruled the paper off in lines and columns and was writing out in the extreme left column in a large childish hand: "2... 4, 5..." I never got to know what those figures stood for and what else he wrote down.

He wrote a long time, for about an hour, scratching away at the paper with his pen, breathing hard and covering the sheet with his sleeve. His fingers were scratched and bruised, and his nails bitten off short. His neck and ears had not been washed for a long time. Now and again he stopped, nervously biting his lips, thinking or trying to remember something, then went

on writing again. Hot and cold water had been brought in—I had carried the pails and the pot into the dugout myself without letting anyone in—but he was still scratching away with his pen. To keep the water hot I put one of the pails on the stove.

When he had finished writing, he folded the written sheets, slipped them into an envelope, licked the gummed edge and carefully sealed it. Then he took a large envelope, put the other one into it and just as carefully sealed it.

I handed the envelope to the messenger, who was waiting outside.

"Deliver this at once to regimental headquarters. It's urgent. Report back to Krayev."

I then went back and poured some cold water in one of the pails to cool it. The boy slipped out of the jacket, got into the pot and started to wash.

I felt guilty towards him. By refusing to answer my questions he had no doubt been acting in accordance with instructions, and I had shouted at him, bullied him, tried to get information out of him that it was not my business to know. Scouts, as everyone knows, have secrets which even superior staff officers are not allowed to pry into.

Now I was prepared to wait on him like a nurse. I even wanted to wash him myself, but I couldn't bring myself to do it—he was not looking in my direction and I might not have been there for all the notice he took of me.

"Here, let me scrub your back," I offered hesitantly.

"I'll do it myself," he snapped.

There was nothing for it but for me to stand by the stove holding a clean towel and a cotton shirt, which he was to put on, and to stir the millet porridge and meat in the billycan—my supper, which luckily, I had not eaten that evening.

Washed, he turned out to be fair-haired and fair-skinned. Only his face and hands were darker from the wind or sunburn. He had small, pink, delicate ears, which, I noticed, were asymmetrical, the right one being flattened while the left one stuck out a bit. A noteworthy feature in his face were his eyes—they were large, greenish, and set very wide apart. I had never seen such wide-set eyes before.

He rubbed himself dry, and taking the shirt from my hand—I had warmed it by the stove—he put it on, carefully rolled up the sleeves and sat down at the table. His face had lost some of its hostile remoteness. He looked tired, grave and thoughtful.

I expected him to attack the food, but he only nibbled at it seemingly without any appetite and pushed the billycan away from him. Then he drank a mug of very sweet tea—I did not stint the sugar—with a biscuit from my combat rations, and got up, saying in a low voice: "Thank you."

In the meantime I had taken out the pot—the water in it was as black as ink with only greyish soap suds on top—and beaten up the pillow on the bunk. The boy got into my bed and lay down with his face to the wall and his hand under his cheek. He took everything I did for granted, and it dawned on me that this was not the first time he had returned from "the other side", and that he knew that as soon as army headquarters got to know of his arrival orders would be issued immediately to give him "VIP treatment". I covered him up with two blankets and tucked him in from all sides, like my mother used to do for me when I was a kid.

2

Taking care not to make a noise, I put on my helmet, slipped the cape over my greatcoat and went out on tiptoes, telling the sentry not to let anybody in without my order.

It was a bleak night. Although it had stopped raining, a gusty north wind was blowing, and it was dark and cold.

My dugout was in the underbrush within half a mile of the Dnieper, which was between us and the Germans. The high bank opposite commanded the terrain, and our main line stood back in more favourable positions. In the immediate vicinity of the river we had our outpost sub-units.

I made my way through the underbrush in the dark, guided mainly by the light of the distant flares from the enemy bank. They shot up here and there all along the German lines. Every now and then machine-gun bursts splashed into the stillness of the night. Every few minutes the Germans raked our riverside zone and the river itself by way of "preventive measure", as our Regimental Commander put it.

Coming out to the Dnieper, I made my way to the trench where our nearest outpost was located and sent for the commanding officer of the outpost platoon. When he came up, breathless, we went out together along the bank. He asked me straightaway about the "kid", probably thinking I had come in connection with the boy's detention. I quickly changed

the subject, but my own thoughts kept returning to the boy. I peered into the dark river. It was about half a mile wide at this spot, and I simply couldn't believe that little Bondarev had come from the other side. Who were the people who had taken him across and where were they? Where was the boat? How could the outpost patrol have missed it? Maybe they had slipped him into the water at a considerable distance from the bank? But how could they have let such a thin weak boy take the water in this cold autumn weather?

Our division was making ready to force a crossing of the Dnieper. The manual I received—and I had studied it until I knew it almost by heart—this manual, intended for grown-up healthy men, said: "But if the temperature of the water is below $+15^{\circ}\text{C}$ even a good swimmer will find it extremely difficult to swim across, and in the case of broad rivers, impossible." And what if the temperature was $+5^{\circ}$ instead of $+15^{\circ}$?

No, obviously the boat had come close to the bank, but in that case why had no one spotted it? How could it have sheered off after putting the boy ashore without being observed? I couldn't make head or tail of it.

The outpost was fully alert. Only in one fox-hole situated right next to the river did we discover a dozing soldier. He was taking a cat-nap standing up, leaning against the wall of the trench with his helmet cocked over his eyes. At our approach he clutched his tommy-gun still half-asleep, and all but discharged a round of lead at us. I ordered him to be replaced immediately and punished, after swearing both at him and the squad commander under my breath.

After doing the rounds we sat down in a shelter recess of the right flank and had a smoke with the men. There were four soldiers in the trench, which was a large one with a machine-gun emplacement.

"Did you find out who that nipper was, Comrade Lieutenant?" one of them asked me in a husky voice. He was standing by the machine-gun, not smoking.

"What makes you ask?" I said guardedly.

"Nothing. I was just thinking there's more to this than meets the eye. You wouldn't turn a dog out o'doors in such weather, and here he goes and wades the river. Why should he do that? He may have been looking out for a boat to take him across to the other side for all we know. It looks fishy to me. I'd put the screw on that kid, I would, and make him come clean."

"It does look fishy," another soldier said rather uncertainly. "Just sits scowling like a wolf-cub and doesn't speak a word, I heard say. And why is he undressed?"

"The kid's from Novoselki," I lied, drawing slowly at my cigarette. Novoselki was a large village, half gutted, within four kilometres of us. "The villagers, including his mother, were herded away to Germany, and he doesn't know what to do with himself. Small wonder he wanted to drown himself."

"Oh, so that's what it is!"

"He's heartsick, poor fellow," one of the men said with an understanding sigh. He was an elderly soldier, who squatted opposite me, smoking. The glow of his cigarette lit up his broad dark face covered with several days' growth of beard. "Must be taking it hard. Yurlov's always thinking bad of people, always trying to show how nasty they are. It isn't right," he said softly and judiciously, turning to the soldier who was standing by the machine-gun.

"I'm vigilant," Yurlov said doggedly. "And nothing you say can change me. I can't stand your goody-goody trustful people. It's because of this trustfulness that all the land from the frontiers to Moscow is drenched with blood. I've got my bellyfull! If you're so full o' the milk of human kindness, why don't you lend some of it to the Germans to grease their souls with! You tell me this, Comrade Senior Lieutenant—where are his clothes? And when all's said and done, what was he doing in the water? It's fishy, I tell you."

"Look at him, questioning his superior!" the elderly soldier said sarcastically. "Why don't you leave the kid alone? As if they won't be able to handle this without you. You'd better ask our command what they think about some vodka. It's freezing cold out here, and we've nothing to warm ourselves with. When are they going to issue some—ask him that. They'll see about the kid."

I sat with the men a little longer, then recollecting that Kholin would soon be coming down, I took my leave and started back. I refused to be escorted, and shortly regretted it. In the dark I lost my way, and blundered on among the bushes, pulled up by the sharp challenging cries of the sentries. It was half an hour before I reached my dugout, chilled to the marrow.

To my surprise the boy was not sleeping.

He was sitting in his shirt, his feet lowered over the side of the bunk. The stove had long since gone out and it was pretty cold in the dugout—you could see your breath in the air.

"Haven't they come yet?" the boy asked pointblank.

"No. You go to sleep. I'll wake you when they come."

"Did he get there?"

"Who?" I asked blankly.

"The messenger. With the dispatch."

"Yes," I said, although I did not know. After sending the messenger off I had forgotten all about him or the message.

For some moments the boy stared thoughtfully at the burning wick, then suddenly, and, as it seemed to me, anxiously, he asked:

"Were you here when I was sleeping? Did I speak in my sleep?"

"No, I didn't hear anything. Why?"

"Nothing, I never used to speak. But now I'm not sure. I've become sort of nervy," he confessed.

Presently Kholin arrived. A tall, dark-haired handsome man of twenty-seven, he burst into the dugout carrying a large German suitcase. He thrust the suitcase at me without stopping and ran up to the boy.

"Ivan!"

At the sight of Kholin the boy came to life immediately and smiled. It was the first time he had smiled, a joyful smile, like a child.

It was a meeting of friends, very good friends, and without a doubt at that moment I was one too many here. They embraced like grown-ups; Kholin kissed the boy several times, stepped back, then gripped his thin narrow shoulders, looked at him rapturous-eyed and said:

"Katasonov is waiting for you with a boat at Dikovka, and you are here."

"The place is lousy with Germans at Dikovka, you can't get near the bank," the boy said, smiling guiltily. "I swam from Sosnovka. Half way I was all in, and on top of it I got cramps. I thought it was the end."

"Don't tell me you swam across!" Kholin exclaimed astounded.

"Yes, on a log. Don't be angry, I couldn't help it. The boats were upstream and all of them guarded. Looking for that dinghy of yours in the dark would have been too risky. They'd have nabbed me in no time! I was all in, you know, and that log was twisting round and slipping away, and then my leg got cramps—well, I thought, I'm done for! The current—it carried me along, I don't know how I managed to fight clear."

Sosnovka was a hamlet upstream, on the enemy's side of the river, and the boy must have drifted nearly two miles. It was nothing short of a miracle that he didn't drown that dark October night, a weak little boy struggling in the cold stream.

Kholin swung round, shot out a muscular arm and shook hands with me. Then he took the suitcase, deposited it lightly on the bunk, clicked open the locks and said, turning to me:

"Go and drive the car up, we couldn't get any closer. And tell the sentry not to allow anyone to come in here and not to come in himself—we don't want any witnesses. Get me?"

This pet phrase, "get me", of Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov had caught on not only in our division, but at army headquarters too.

Ten minutes later, after I had found the car and shown the driver how to drive up to the dugout, I returned to find the boy transfigured.

He was wearing a little cloth tunic, evidently specially made for him, with an Order of the Patriotic War and a brand-new "For Bravery" medal pinned to it, a snow-white neckband, dark-blue breeches and neat high-boots. He looked now like a trainee—the regiment had several of them—except that he had no shoulder-straps to his tunic, and that the real trainees looked much stronger and healthier. He was perched sedately on a stool talking to Kholin. When I came in they fell silent, and I even fancied that Kholin had sent me out to see about the car so as to be able to have a talk without witnesses.

"Where have you been all this time?" he said nevertheless, looking displeased. "Get another mug and sit down."

The food he had brought with him was laid out on the table, which was covered with a clean newspaper. There was pork fat, smoked sausage, two tins of canned meat, a package of biscuits, two paper bags containing some eatables and a flask in a cloth cover. On the bunk lay a smart, brand-new, boy's size sheepskin coat and an officer's fur cap with earflaps.

Kholin cut the bread up into thin delicate slices, then poured vodka out of the flask into three mugs—half a mug each for himself and me, and a finger level for the boy.

"Here's to our meeting!" Kholin said in a brisk rollicking tone, lifting his mug.

"Here's to my always coming back," the boy said gravely.

Kholin threw him a swift glance, and proposed:

"Here's to your going to the Suvorov school and becoming an officer."

"No, that'll be afterwards!" the boy protested. "But while the war is on, it's to my always coming back!" he repeated stubbornly.

"All right, have it your way. Here's to your future. To victory!"

We touched mugs and drank. The boy wasn't used to vodka—he started coughing and tears came into his eyes, which he wiped with a furtive gesture. Imitating Kholin, he snatched a slice of bread and sniffed at it for quite a time before slowly chewing it.

Kholin deftly made some sandwiches and offered them to the boy. The latter took one and ate it slowly, reluctantly, as it were.

"Tuck in, come on!" Kholin said, attacking the sandwiches with relish.

"I've got out of the habit somehow," the boy sighed. "I can't."

He did not seem to take any notice of me at all. Stimulated by the vodka Kholin and I were having a good tuck in, but the boy, after eating two small sandwiches, wiped his hands and mouth with his handkerchief, and murmured, "That'll do for me."

Kholin emptied a bag of chocolates in coloured wrappers on the table. The sight of the sweets did not bring the slightest sign of joyful animation to the boy's face, as it usually does with children of his age. He took one of the chocolates unhurriedly and apathetically, as if he had been eating chocolate candy every day of his life, unwrapped it, bit off a piece, then pushed the sweets back into the middle of the table, saying, "Help yourselves."

"No go, old chap. Not after vodka, you know," Kholin said.

"Then let's be going," the boy suddenly said, getting up and turning his eyes away from the table. "The Lieutenant-Colonel is waiting for me. Let's go!" he demanded.

"We'll go in a minute," Kholin said, somewhat disconcerted. He was holding the flask, obviously intending to replenish our two mugs, but seeing the boy get up, he put it back in its place. "We'll go in a minute," he repeated glumly and got up.

Meanwhile, the boy was trying on the fur cap.

"It's too big, drat it!"

"There wasn't any smaller size. I chose it myself," Kholin said half-apologetically. "It's only till we get there. We'll think of something."

He glanced with regret at the snacks on the table, picked up the flask, shook it, eyed me ruefully and said with a sigh,

"Fancy all this stuff going to waste, eh!"

"Leave it here for him!" the boy said with an expression of annoyance and scorn. "You're not hungry, are you?"

"Of course not! But this flask is class-2 supplies," Kholin turned it off with a joke. "And he doesn't need sweets."

"Don't be stingy!"

"Ah well, it can't be helped, I suppose," Kholin said, then turned to me. "Get the sentry out of the way. And take care that no one sees us."

I threw my soggy cape over my shoulders and went up to the boy. As Kholin did up the hooks of his sheepskin coat, he boasted: "I've got plenty of hay in the car—a whole haystack of it! I brought blankets and pillows, too. We'll tumble in and sleep all the way to HQ."

"Well, good-bye, Ivan," I said, holding out my hand.

"Not good-bye, but so long!" he corrected me gravely, giving me a tiny narrow hand.

The I.S.'s canvas-topped Dodge stood within ten paces of the dugout. I could barely make it out.

"Rodionov!" I called quietly to the sentry.

"Yes, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," his hoarse voice sounded behind me, close at hand.

"Go to the staff dugout. I'll call you in a minute."

The soldier disappeared in the darkness.

I walked round, but there was nobody in sight. The driver of the Dodge, wearing a cape over his sheepskin coat was dozing over his wheel.

I went back to the dugout, groped for the door and opened it.

"Come on."

The boy and Kholin carrying the suitcase slipped past me into the car. There was a rustle of tarpaulin, a short conversation in whispered undertones—Kholin woke the driver—then the engine started up and the car moved off.

3

Sergeant-Major Katasonov, who commanded a platoon of the Division's Reconnaissance Company, turned up three days later.

He was a short lean man of over thirty, with a small mouth, a short upper lip, a small flattened nose with tiny nostrils, and grey-blue lively little eyes. It was a mild-looking, pleasant face whose gentleness reminded one of a rabbit. Katasonov was

a modest, quiet, retiring man. He spoke with a pronounced lisp, and that may have been one of the reasons why he was so shy and taciturn. One would be hard put to it to imagine that this man was one of the army's best hunters after live prisoners.

Katasonov reminded me of the boy Bondarev—he had often been in my thoughts these last few days. I decided, when an opportunity offered, to ask Katasonov about him. He ought to know, as it was he who had been waiting for him with a boat that night at Dikovka, where "the place was so lousy with Germans that you couldn't get near the bank".

Coming into the staff dugout, he touched his crimson-edged trench cap and stood patiently by the door without taking off his kit-bag, waiting until I had finished telling off the clerks.

They were tied up in knots, and I was angry and exasperated, having just received a nagging lecture from Maslov over the phone. He rang me up almost every day, first thing in the morning, and always on the same business—forever demanding reports, statements, forms and diagrams in and out of schedule time. I had a suspicion that some of this accountancy is a routine of his own invention—he is a great lover of paper work.

Listening to him, one would think that if I delivered all those forms and papers to regimental headquarters punctually on time the war would quickly be over with us the victors. It all depended on me, it seemed. Maslov demanded that I put my "heart and soul" into the business. I did my best, but the trouble was we had no aides in the battalion, and no experienced clerk. As a rule, we were late and nearly always guilty of some mistake or other. I often caught myself thinking that it was easier to fight than to handle all this paper work, and I looked forward to the time when they send us a real battalion commander who would take this job off my hands.

While I was swearing at the clerks Katasonov stood waiting quietly by the door, his cap clenched in his hand.

"Are you waiting to see me?" I asked, turning to him at last, although I had no need to ask. Maslov had warned me that Katasonov was coming, and told me to admit him to the observation post and give him every assistance.

"Yes," Katasonov said, smiling shyly. "I want to take a look at the Germans."

"All right, go ahead and look," I said graciously, after a slight pause designed to give my words more weight, and ordered the messenger to take him down to the battalion OP.

Two hours later, after dispatching my report to regimental

headquarters, I went to sample the food at battalion kitchen and made my way to the OP through the underbrush.

Katsonov was "taking a look" at the Germans through the stereoscopic telescope. I had a look, too, although it was all familiar to me.

Across the broad sheet of the brooding Dnieper, which had a dark pitted surface in the wind, lay the enemy bank. A narrow strip of sand ran along the water's edge; above it was a terraced projecting ledge not less than a metre high and beyond it a sloping clayey bank with bushes growing here and there; at night it was patrolled by the enemy outposts. Farther up was a sheer bluff rising almost vertically, about eight metres high. Along the top of this bluff stretched the trenches of the enemy's forward area. Just then only observers were on duty there, while the rest were relaxing in the shelters. By nightfall the Germans would crawl out into the trenches, keep up a desultory fire in the dark and let off flares until the morning.

On the sandy strip of bank on the other side lay five corpses. Three of them, lying apart in different poses, were obviously decomposing—I had been watching them for over a week now. Two fresh corpses were seated side by side against the ledge directly facing my OP. Both were stripped of their outer clothing and had no boots on. One was wearing a striped sailor's vest which could be distinctly seen through the telescope.

"Lyakhov and Moroz," Katasonov said, his eye glued on the eyepiece.

They were his comrades, both of them sergeants of Divisional Reconnaissance Company. He told me how it had happened in his quiet lisping voice, as he continued to look through the telescope.

Four days ago a scout party—five men—had gone over to get a prisoner. They had crossed downstream and captured their prisoner without making any noise, but on their way back they were spotted by the Germans. Three of them started retreating towards the boat with their captured Jerry and managed to get away. One of them was killed, though—blew up on a mine, and the prisoner was wounded by a machine-gun burst as they were getting away in the boat. The other two—Lyakhov (the one in the sailor's shirt) and Moroz kept the Germans at bay to cover their comrades' retreat.

They were killed in the fray. The Germans stripped them, dragged their bodies down to the river in the night and fixed them up so that we could see them from the other side as a warning.

"They ought to be taken in," Katasonov finished his brief account with a sigh.

Coming out of the shelter with him I asked about Bondarev.

"Ivan?" Katasonov looked at me and a warm tender smile lit up his face. "Wonderful kid! Obstinate as they make 'em, though. Kicked up a shindy yesterday."

"Why?"

"War is no job for a kid like him, surely! They're sending him to school—the Suvorov Military School. The Commander has issued the order. But he won't hear of it. He has one answer—after the war. And now, he says, I'm going to fight, I'm going scouting."

"I can't see him doing any scouting now that the Commander has issued the order."

"Ah, there's no holding this fellow back. Hatred is burning him all up inside. If they don't send him he'll go himself. He's done it before," Katasonov said with a sigh. Glancing at his watch he said hastily: "Oh, I've got to be off. Is this the way to artillery OP?"

A moment later he was slipping through the underbrush, carefully parting the bushes and treading noiselessly.

* * *

Katasonov spent two days and nights "taking a look" at the Germans from the observation posts of our battalion and the Third Battalion on our right, as well as from the battery lookout, and making notes and sketches in his notebook. It was reported to me that he had spent the whole night at the telescope at our OP, and he was there again in the morning, in the day-time and in the evening. I found myself wondering when the man slept.

On the third day, in the morning, Kholin arrived. He burst into the staff dugout, greeting everyone boisterously. "Hold it, and don't say I'm stingy," he said, gripping my hand until the finger-joints crunched and I squirmed with the pain.

"I'll need you," he said, then picked up the telephone, asked to be put through to the Third Battalion and spoke to its commanding officer, Captain Ryabtsev.

"Katasonov will be coming down. See that he has every assistance. He will tell you all about it. And give him a hot meal. Now listen: if the artillerymen or anybody else ask for me, tell them I'll be at your HQ after 1300. I'll be needing you too. Have the defence scheme ready and be on the spot."

He treated me and Ryabtsev who was ten years his senior—as his subordinates, although he was not our chief. It was the way he had. He spoke in exactly the same way with the officers at divisional HQ and with our regimental commander. To all of us, of course, he represented the higher staff, but there was more to it than that. Like most intelligence officers he was convinced that his particular arm of the service was the most important in the army and therefore everybody was obliged to assist him.

Even now, as he put down the receiver, he said to me in a tone of command, without taking the trouble to ask whether I was busy or not: "Take the defence scheme and let's go and see your troops."

I did not like his offhand way of treating me but having heard a good deal about him from the scouts, who told me stories of his bravery and resourcefulness, I held my peace and forgave him what I would never have forgiven another. I had no urgent business in hand, but I purposely said I would be detained a little while at HQ, and he left the dugout saying he would wait for me in the car.

In a quarter of an hour or so, after looking through the regimental orders file and the rifle cards, I went out. The Intelligence Section's canvas-topped Dodge was standing under some fir trees a little way off, its driver pacing up and down beside it with a tommy-gun slung from his shoulder. Kholin was sitting at the wheel with a large-scale map spread on it in front of him. Next to him sat Katasonov with the defence scheme in his hand. They were talking, but fell silent at my approach, turning their heads in my direction. Katasonov hastily jumped out of the car and greeted me with his usual shy smile.

"All right, go ahead," Kholin said to him, rolling up the map and scheme and getting out of the car. "See that everything's shipshape and have a rest. I'll be down in two or three hours."

I took Kholin down to the front line by one of the many paths. The Dodge moved off in the direction of the Third Battalion. Kholin was in a cheerful excited mood, and he strode along whistling a gay tune. It was a cold, quiet day, so quiet that you almost forgot there was a war on. But the war was there, right in front of us, with its freshly dug trenches along the edge of the wood, and a passage on the left leading down to the communication trench—a strong profile trench covered on top and carefully camouflaged with turf and shrubs and running right down to the bank. It was over a hundred metres long.

Undermanned as the battalion was, the digging of this trench at nighttime (and by a single company at that) had been no easy job. I told Kholin about this, expecting appreciation of the job we had done, but he cast a cursory glance around and merely wanted to know where the battalion observation post and look-outs were located. I showed him.

"How quiet it is!" he remarked not without surprise, and took up a position behind some bushes near the edge of the wood, from where he examined the Dnieper and the bank through his field glasses. The knoll on which we stood commanded a clear view of the opposite bank. He did not seem to take much interest in my "troops", however.

Standing behind him as he examined the river, I was suddenly reminded of Bondarev.

"That boy who was at my place—who is he, after all? Where does he come from?"

"Boy?" Kholin queried absent-mindedly, his thoughts elsewhere. "Oh, you mean Ivan! Curiosity killed the cat, you know," he said. "Come on, let's try your Metro."

It was dark in the trench. Chinks had been left here and there to admit some light, but they were covered with branches. We moved through the semidarkness with our heads slightly bent, and it seemed as if there would be no end to this damp and gloomy passage. Presently it grew lighter ahead of us and we found ourselves in the battle outpost trench within twenty yards of the Dnieper.

The young sergeant in command of the squad made his report to me as he glanced at the well set-up deep-chested figure of Kholin.

Though the bank of the river was sandy, there was squelchy mud ankle-deep in the trench, probably because the floor was at a lower level than the water in the river.

I knew that Kholin, when the mood took him, liked to chat and joke, and that is what he did now. He took out a packet of cigarettes and treated me and the soldiers to a smoke. Lighting up, he remarked cheerily:

"What a life you fellows have! You wouldn't believe there's a war on. Everything peaceful and quiet!"

"Sure, a rest-home!" machine-gunner Chupakhin, a lanky stoop-shouldered private in padded jacket and trousers said gloomily. Taking off his helmet, he stuck it on a spade handle and raised it above the parapet. Some seconds later shots rang out from the opposite bank and bullets whistled overhead.

"Sniper?" Kholin asked.

"Rest-home," Chupakhin repeated grimly. "With mud baths under the eye of loving relations."

We went back to the observation post by the same dark trench. Kholin did not like the idea of the Germans keeping such a close watch on our forward line. Although it was only natural for the enemy to be alert and watchful, Kholin suddenly grew gloomy and silent.

Back at OP he examined the right bank through the telescope for about ten minutes, asked the observers various questions, thumbed through the log-book, and swore at them for not knowing a thing and making meagre entries which gave no idea of the enemy's habits and behaviour. I did not agree with him, but said nothing.

"D'you know who they are there in the sand?" he said to me, meaning the dead scouts on the opposite bank.

"Yes."

"You mean to say you can't get them out?" he continued scornfully. "It's only an hour's job. Waiting for instructions from above, I suppose?"

Coming out of the shelter trench I asked him:

"What is it you and Katasonov are looking at all the time? Going on a raid?"

"Details will be supplied on application!" Kholin flung out without looking at me, and strode off through the wood in the direction of the Third Battalion.

I followed him.

"I don't need you any more," he announced suddenly without turning round.

I stopped, disconcerted, staring at his retreating figure, then turned back to HQ.

"Well, of all the...!" Kholin's domineering manner annoyed me. Smarting from the insult, I swore under my breath. A passing soldier saluted me and looked back at me in surprise.

At HQ the clerk reported:

"The major phoned twice. He ordered you to report."

I rang up our regimental commander.

"How are things with you?" was his first question, uttered in his calm slow voice.

"Normal, Comrade Major."

"Kholin will be calling on you. Do all he asks and give him every assistance."

"Kholin be damned!" I said to myself.

After a pause the major added:

"These are 'Volga's' orders. Hundred and One phoned me."

"Volga" was the Army HQ. Hundred and One was our Divisional Commander Colonel Voronov. "Who cares!" I thought. "Catch me running after Kholin! I'll do only what he asks me. I'll be hanged if I'm going to dance attendance on him!"

And so I went about my own business and tried to dismiss Kholin from my thoughts.

In the afternoon I dropped in at the battalion medical aid post. It was housed in two spacious shelters on the right flank next to the Third Battalion. This arrangement was very inconvenient, but the dugouts and shelters which we occupied had been built and equipped by the Germans, who least of all had us in mind.

The new medical officer, a pretty trim-looking blonde of about twenty with bright-blue eyes, who had arrived ten days ago, saluted awkwardly by putting her hand to the gauze kerchief tied over her fluffy hair, and reported in a fumbling stammering way. I did not say anything to her about it. Her predecessor, Senior Lieutenant Vostrikov—an old army surgeon suffering from asthma—had been killed a fortnight ago on the field of battle. He had been an experienced, brave, and efficient man. But she? So far I was anything but pleased.

The military uniform—the spruce tunic drawn tightly round the waist by a broad belt, the close-fitting skirt hugging her strong hips, and the soft leather high-boots on her shapely legs—suited her admirably. Our new medical officer was a bit too good to look at.

Incidentally, she and I were both Muscovites. But for the war I would probably have fallen in love on meeting her, and if she reciprocated I would have been the happiest man. I would have dates with her in the evening, dance with her in Gorky Park and kiss somewhere among the trees. But there was a war on, worse luck. I acted as battalion commander and she was just the battalion M.O. as far as I was concerned. And an M.O. who couldn't manage her job at that.

I told her in a brusque tone that there were cases of lousiness again among the companies, that the men's underwear was not properly treated and bathing facilities had not yet been organised. I made a number of other complaints and reminded her that she was a commanding officer, that she did not have to do everything herself, and that she should make the company's medical orderlies do their jobs properly.

She stood before me stiffly at attention, head lowered, reiterating in a small, tremulous voice: "Very good ... very good ... very good"—and assuring me that she was trying her hardest and "everything would be all right soon".

She looked so pathetic that I felt sorry for her. But I dared not indulge that feeling—I had no right to pity her. That feeling was permissible in defence, but with the prospect of our troops going into action and forcing the Dnieper there would be dozens of wounded in the battalion and their lives would depend a great deal on this girl who wore the shoulder-straps of a medical service lieutenant.

It was with an uneasy mind that I left the aid post dugout, the medical officer following me.

About a hundred paces from us, on the right, there was a knoll where the battery men had set up their OP. At the base of it, on the rear side, stood a group of officers—Kholin, Ryabtsev, battery commanders, the commanding officer of the Third Battalion's mortar company, and two other officers whom I did not know. Kholin and two others were holding maps or schemes. Apparently, preparations for a trench raid were afoot, and it looked as if it was going to be held on the section of the Third Battalion.

Seeing us, the officers turned and looked in our direction. Ryabtsev, the artillerymen and the mortar man waved a greeting to me. I waved back. I expected Kholin to hail me—seeing that I was to "give him every assistance"—but he stood sideways to me, showing the officers something on the map.

I turned to the medical officer:

"I give you two days. Put things in order and report to me."

She muttered something unintelligible. I saluted brusquely, and moved away, determined, at the first opportunity, to have her relieved. The new M.O. would definitely have to be a man.

I spent the whole afternoon in the companies, inspecting the dugouts and shelters, checking the weapons, chatting with the men who had returned from the battalion aid post and having a game of dominoes with them.

It was nightfall when I got back to my dugout to find Kholin there. He was fast asleep, sprawling on my bed in trousers and tunic. On the table lay a scribbled note: "Wake me at 1830. Kholin."

I had come just in time to wake him. He opened his eyes, and sat up on the bunk.

"You know a good thing when you see it, young fellow-

me-lad!" he said, yawning and stretching himself.

"What?" I said blankly.

"That medical gal of yours—nice bit o'fluff." Kholin crossed over to the corner where the wash-handstand hung and began to wash himself. "Take my advice, though, don't be seen with her in the daytime. It's no good for your reputation."

"Go to hell!" I shouted, losing my temper.

"Don't be rude, Galtsev," he said pleasantly, snorting and splashing water all round him. "Can't you take a joke? This towel of yours is dirty, she could have washed it. I don't think much of your discipline."

He wiped his face on the "dirty" towel and enquired:

"Anybody ask for me?"

"I don't know, I wasn't here."

"Didn't anyone phone?"

"The Regimental Commander phoned about twelve o'clock."

"What about?"

"Asked me to give you assistance."

"Asked you? Now, fancy that!" Kholin said with a grin.

"Pretty good arrangement, I must say." He considered me with a glance of mockery. "My dear fellow, what assistance can you give me!"

He lit a cigarette and went out, but soon came back again rubbing his hands and looking pleased.

"It's going to be a fine night, couldn't be better. God is merciful after all. I say, do you believe in God? Where are you off to?" he demanded. "No, don't go away, I may need you yet."

He sat down on the bunk and began to croon, repeating the same words over and over again with an air of abstraction:

*Ah, the night's so dark,
And I'm scared,
See me home, Marusya.*

I spoke on the phone with the commanding officer of the Fourth Company, and when I put down the receiver I caught the sound of an approaching car. There came a tap on the door.

"Come in!"

Katasonov walked in, closed the door behind him, touched his cap and reported:

"We've arrived, Comrade Captain."

"Dismiss the sentry!" Kholin said to me, breaking off his song and getting up quickly.

We followed Katasonov out. It was drizzling. Closed to the

dugout stood the familiar car under its canvas top. Waiting until the sentry had disappeared in the darkness Kholin unfastened the canvas from behind and whispered, "Ivan!"

"Yes," answered a low childish voice, and a small figure appeared from under the canvas and jumped to the ground.

4

"Good evening!" the boy said to me as soon as we entered the dugout, and with a sudden friendly smile he gave me his hand.

He looked restored and stronger, and there was a healthy glow in his cheeks. Katasonov brushed the straw from his little sheepskin coat and Kholin enquired solicitously, "Maybe you'll lie down and have a rest?"

"What, after sleeping all day?"

"Then find us something interesting, will you," Kholin said to me. "Some magazine or something ... one with pictures in it."

Katasonov helped the boy off with his coat, and I laid out on the table several issues of *Ogonyok*, and illustrated army magazines. The boy had seen some of the magazines and he laid them aside.

Today he was unrecognisable—talkative, smiling every now and then and looking at me in a friendly way. I, too, had an extraordinarily warm feeling for this tow-headed boy. I reminded myself of a tin of fruit-drops that I had, and I got it out and placed it before him. Then I poured him out a mug of baked sour milk with a chocolate-coloured skin on top of it, and sat down next to him; and so we sat, looking through the magazines together.

Meanwhile Kholin and Katasonov had brought in from the car the already familiar German suitcase, a big bundle tied up in a cape, two tommy-guns and a small plywood suitcase.

They pushed the bundle away under the bunk and sat down behind us, talking. I heard Kholin say to Katasonov in an undertone:

"You should hear the way he spouts Deutsch, like a regular Jerry. I wanted to use him as an interpreter last spring, and now he's commanding a battalion."

Obviously, he was referring to me. What he said was true. Kholin and Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov, hearing me once interrogate some prisoners by the order of Divisional Com-

mander, tried to persuade me to go over to Intelligence Section as an interpreter. I refused and don't in the least regret it. I would have willingly taken a job in Intelligence, but not as an interpreter.

Katasonov poked the stove and murmured, "It's a wonderful night out!"

He and Kholin discussed the assignment in low tones and I learned that what they were planning was not a raid at all. It became clear to me that the boy was going behind the enemy's lines and that Kholin and Katasonov were to take him across the Dnieper that night.

For that purpose they had brought with them a "Shturmovka"—a small inflatable boat—but Katasonov was trying to persuade Kholin to take a flat-bottomed boat from my battalion. "They're handy little dinghies," he whispered.

They'd smelled it out, the devils! The battalion had five flat-bottomed fishing boats. We had been lugging them about with us these last two months. To keep them from being appropriated for the other battalions, which had only one boat apiece, I had them carefully camouflaged, kept them hidden under straw when on the march, and showed only two boats instead of five in the accountancy reports on available fording facilities.

The boy was eating candy and looking through the magazines, lending no ear to the conversation between Kholin and Katasonov. He put aside one of the magazines containing a story about scouts.

"I'm going to read this one," he said. "Haven't you got a gramophone, by the way?"

"I have, but the spring's broken."

"You people here live poor," he remarked, then suddenly asked: "Can you wiggle your ears?"

"My ears? No, I can't," I said, smiling. "Why?"

"Kholin can!" he announced with a note of triumph. He turned round, saying, "Come on, Kholin, show us the ear wiggle!"

"Anything to oblige!" Kholin sprang to his feet with alacrity, stood before us and began to wiggle his ears, while his face remained perfectly motionless.

The boy looked at me with a pleased triumphant air.

"Don't let it worry you," Kholin said to me. "I'll teach you how to wiggle your ears. And now come along and show us the boats."

"Will you take me with you?" I asked to my own surprise.

"Take you where?"

"To the other side."

"Look at him," Kholin said, jerking a thumb at me. "What do you want to go to the other side for?" Then, eyeing me over with an appraising look, he asked: "Can you swim, at least?"

"Never you worry, I can swim and row."

"How do you swim—downwards, in a vertical line?" Kholin enquired with a dead-pan expression.

"As good as you, at any rate."

"Could you swim across the Dnieper, say?"

"Five times," I answered. And that was true, considering that I had in mind light-clad bathing in summer conditions. "I can swim it easily there and back five times!"

"The fellow's ripsnorter!" Kholin said, and suddenly burst out laughing. They all three began to laugh. Rather Kholin and the boy laughed, while Katasonov smiled shyly.

Kholin suddenly grew serious.

"You don't happen to be an angler, do you?" he said.

"Oh, go to hell!" I said, losing my temper.

"There, you see," Kholin said, pointing at me, "goes right off the handle. No self-control. Ragged nerves. And yet he wants us to take him over to the other side. Nothing doing, my dear chap."

"Then I won't give you a boat."

"We'll take the boat ourselves. Haven't we got hands of our own? If it comes to that I'll ring up Divisional Commander, and you'll lug that boat down to the river on your own back!"

"Oh, stop it!" the boy intervened in a conciliatory tone. "He'll give us the boat. You will, won't you?" he said, looking up into my face.

"I'll have to, I suppose," I said, smiling ruefully.

"Then let's go and have a look!" Kholin said, taking hold of my sleeve. "You stay here," he said to the boy. "But don't play about, have a rest."

Katasonov put the plywood suitcase on a stool and opened it. It contained various tools, tins, rags, tow, and bandages. Before putting on my padded jacket, I hitched a commando knife with an ornamental handle to my belt.

"Gee, what a knife!" the boy exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with admiration. "Show me!"

I held it out to him. He toyed with it, then said:

"I say, let me have it!"

"I'm afraid I can't. It's a present, you see."

I wasn't deceiving him. The knife really was a present, a keep-sake from my best friend Konstantin Kholodov. Kostya and I had sat together at the same desk in school, had been called up together, had received our training at the same military school and had fought together in the same division, and later in the same regiment.

...Sunrise on that September morning had found me in the trenches on the bank of the Desna. I saw Kostya with his company start ferrying across to the right bank—it was the first company in our division to do so. The rafts, made up of logs, poles and barrels, had passed midstream when the Germans opened up on the rafting site with their artillery and mortars. A white fountain of water spouted into the air over Kostya's raft. What happened after that I didn't see—the receiver in the telephonist's hand rasped: "Galtsev, forward!" I leapt over the parapet, followed by my whole company—a hundred odd men—and made a dash for the water's edge where similar rafts stood waiting. Within half an hour we were engaged in a hand-to-hand fight on the right bank.

I hadn't decided yet what I was going to do with the knife—whether to keep it, or to go down to that little street off Arbat when I got back to Moscow and give the knife to Kostya's old folks in memory of their son.

"I'll give you another one," I promised the boy.

"I want this one!" he whined, peering into my eyes. "Give it to me."

"Don't be so stingy, Galtsev," Kholin flung out. He stood dressed, waiting for me and Katasonov. "Don't be mean!"

"I'll give you another one. One exactly like it," I said to the boy.

"You'll have a knife like that," Katasonov said, after examining it. "I'll get one for you."

"I'll give you one, upon my word of honour!" I assured him.

"This one's a present, don't you understand—a keep-sake."

"Oh, all right," the boy said petulantly. "Let me play with it while you're gone."

"Leave him the knife and come along," Kholin said impatiently.

"Why should I go with you? What's the sense?" I said, thinking out loud, as I buttoned up my jacket. "You're not taking me with you, and know where the boats are without me."

"Come along," Kholin pushed me. "I'll take you with me. But not today."

The three of us went out and made our way towards the right flank through the underbrush. It was raining—a cold fine drizzle of a rain. It was dark and overclouded, without a star in the sky.

Katasonov glided on ahead of us, carrying the suitcase. He trod noiselessly and so confidently that one would think he had been using this trail every night. I asked Kholin again about the boy and learned that Bondarev was from Gomel, but that before the war he had lived with his parents at a frontier post somewhere in the Baltic region. His father, a frontier-guard, had been killed on the first day of the war. His eighteen-months-old sister had been killed in the boy's arms during the retreat.

"He has been through more you and I could ever dream of," Kholin whispered. "He was with the partisans, too, and in a death camp in Trostyanets. There's only one thing on his mind—vengeance. When he starts talking about the camp, or about his father and sister, he goes all atremble. I never thought a child could hate like that."

Kholin fell silent for a moment, then resumed in a barely audible whisper:

"We've been arguing with him for two days, trying to get him to go to a Suvorov school. The Commander has been trying too, with kind words and threats. In the end, he allowed him to go out on condition that it was the last time. The trouble is, if you don't send him out things are likely to misfire. When he first came we decided not to send him out. So he went himself. And when he was coming back our own men—the regimental outpost of Shilin's—fired on him. Wounded him in the shoulder. And you couldn't blame them. It was a dark night and nobody was in the know. You see, he does things no grown-up could get away with. He brings in more than your whole Reconnaissance Company does. They nose around the German lines but can't get to the forward area. A reconnaissance party can't get behind the enemy's lines and stay there, say, for five or ten days. It is a rare scout who can manage to do that. The trouble is that an adult, no matter in what disguise, always arouses suspicion. But a kid, a homeless begging waif, is probably the best mask for reconnoitring behind the enemy's lines. You don't know him, he's an ideal kid for the job. It's been decided that if his mother doesn't turn up after the war Katasonov or the Lieutenant-Colonel are going to adopt him."

"Why not you?"

"I'd be only too glad," Kholin whispered with a sigh, "but the Lieutenant-Colonel is against it. He says I need educating myself."

I couldn't help agreeing with the Lieutenant-Colonel. Kholin was rather coarse, and sometimes inclined to be cynical. True, in the boy's presence he kept himself in check. Indeed, at times it even seemed to me that he was a bit afraid of Ivan.

About a hundred and fifty metres short of the bank we turned off into the bushes where the boats were hidden, covered up with fir branches. On my orders they were kept ready and had water poured on them every other day to keep them from warping.

Kholin and Katasonov examined the boats in the light of their pocket torches, feeling over and tapping the bottoms and sides. Then they turned each boat over, got into it, put the oars into the rowlocks and began to row dry. Finally, they selected one, a small broad-sterned boat to seat three or four persons.

"We don't want these irons," Kholin said, taking hold of the chain as if he owned the boat and began to unscrew the ring. "We'll do the rest on the bank. First we'll try it on the water."

We lifted the boat—Kholin by the bow, Katasonov and I by the stern—and took several steps with it between the bushes.

"Oh, damn it," Kholin swore softly. "Heave it up!"

He hoisted the boat onto his back, bottom downwards, gripped the gunwales with arms stretched out over his head, and strode down to the bank in the wake of Katasonov.

I overtook them at the riverside to warn the outpost—apparently that was all they wanted me for.

Kholin slowly stepped down to the water's edge with his burden and stopped. Carefully, so as not to make a noise, we lowered the boat into the water.

"Tumble in!"

We got in. Kholin shoved off and jumped in as the boat slid away from the bank. Pulling with one oar and backing with the other, Katasonov swung the boat round from side to side. Then he and Kholin as if bent on capsizing it, flung their weight first on one side, then on the other until they very nearly flooded it. After that they got down on all fours feeling and stroking the bottom and the sides.

"Handy little boat!" Katasonov whispered approvingly.

"She'll do!" Kholin concurred. "This chap's an expert at pinching boats all right—he won't take any old rubbish! Confess, Galtsev, how many boat-owners have you robbed?"

Every now and then bursts of machine-gun fire, like a deep hollow bark, came across the water from the other side.

"Blazing away like mad," Katasonov whispered. "Jerry's

supposed to be a thrifty blighter, but look at all this waste! What's the sense of blazing away blindly like this? Maybe afterwards, before dawn, we'll be able to drag those poor boys out of it, Captain," he suggested tentatively.

"Not today. Some other time."

Katasonov made for the bank, pulling an easy stroke. We all got ashore.

"Well, we'll muffle the oars and grease the rowlock slots, and that's that!" Kholin whispered to me. He sounded pleased. "Who have you got here, in the trench?"

"Soldiers, two of them."

"Leave one man. A reliable one, who can keep his mouth shut. Get me? I'll drop in on him for a smoke, and sound him out. Warn the outpost platoon commander that at 2200 the reconnaissance party may possibly—don't forget to tell him that—possibly, cross over to the other side. By that time all the posts have to be warned. And let him be in the big trench nearest to the bank, where they have the machine-gun," Kholin said, pointing downstream. "If they start popping at us when we come back I'll twist his neck for him! And not a word about who's going over, why and for what! Bear in mind, you're the only man who knows about Ivan. I'm not taking anything from you in writing, but if you give the show away, I'll..."

"You needn't try to frighten me!" I said resentfully. "What do you take me for, a baby?"

"Keep your hair on, old chap. There's no need to take offence." He slapped me on the shoulder. "I had to warn you. And now, get going!"

Katasonov was already busying himself with the rowlocks. Kholin went over to the boat and got busy too. I stood there for a minute, then walked off down the bank.

I ran into the outpost platoon commander a little way off. He was making the round of the trenches, checking the posts. I instructed him the way Kholin told me and went to Battalion HQ. There I gave various orders and signed some papers, then returned to my dugout.

The boy was alone. He was all red, hot and excited. He had the knife in his hands and my field glasses hanging from his neck. He had a guilty air. The dugout was in disorder, with the table turned upside down and covered with a blanket and the legs of the stool sticking out from under the bunk.

"Please don't be angry," he pleaded. "It was by accident, honor bright it was!"

And then, on the floorboards, which had been scrubbed white only that morning, I saw a large ink stain.

"You're not angry with me, are you?" he said.

"Of course not," I answered, although the disorder in the dugout and the ink stain on the floor went against my grain.

I put everything back in its place without saying a word, the boy helping me. He glanced at the stain and said, "Could you get some water heated? Water and soap. I'll scrub it off."

"Never mind about that, we'll see to it."

I was feeling hungry and ordered supper for six over the phone. I felt sure that Kholin and Katasonov would be as hungry as I was after messing about with that boat.

Seeing the magazine with the story about the scouts I asked the boy, "Well, did you read it?"

"Sure. A thriller. But things don't happen like that, if you ask me. They'd be found out right away. Instead they got medals pinned to their chests afterwards."

"What did you get your medal for?" I asked.

"It was when I was with the partisans."

"Were you a partisan?" I said wonderingly, as if I were hearing it for the first time. "What made you leave?"

"They surrounded us in the forest, so I was flown out by plane. Sent to a boarding school. But I soon did a bunk."

"Ran away?"

"Yes. I felt so miserable there, I just couldn't stand it any more. Eating good bread for nothing. And all you did was to cram: fishes are vertebrates, aquatic animals. Or the importance of herbivorous animals in the life of man."

"You've got to know these things too."

"You do. But what do I want it for now? What's the use of it? I stood it for nearly a month. I'd lie awake at night thinking, why am I here? What for?"

"A boarding school isn't quite the thing," I agreed. "What you need is the Suvorov school. Now if you could get into one of those!"

"Did Kholin teach you that?" the boy asked quickly, eyeing me with suspicion.

"What's Kholin got to do with it? It's what I think. You've done your share of fighting—with the partisans and in reconnaissance. You've made a name for yourself. What you need now is to study. You know what a splendid officer you'd make?"

"Kholin taught you that!" the boy repeated with conviction. "But it's no use. I'll have plenty of time to become an officer."

And while the war is on only a man who is of little use can take things easy."

"That's true, but you're still a little boy!"

"A little boy? Have you ever been in a death camp?" he suddenly demanded, his eyes blazing with a fierce, unchildlike hatred and his tiny upper lip twitching painfully. "Don't tell me what I have to do!" he shouted excitedly. "You ... you don't know a thing ... keep your advice to yourself!"

Several minutes later Kholin came in. He pushed the little plywood suitcase under the bunk, lowered himself onto the stool and began to smoke, inhaling avidly and deeply.

"Smoking all the time," the boy remarked with disapproval. He was admiring the knife, drawing it out of its sheath and shifting it from his right side to his left. "Smoking makes your lungs green."

"Green?" Kholin queried, smiling absently. "So what? Nobody sees 'em."

"I don't want you to smoke. My head will start aching!"

"All right, I'll go out."

Kholin stood up and looked at the boy with a smile. Noticing his flushed face he went up and put his hand to the boy's forehead. It was his turn now to say with disapproval:

"You've been playing about again? It's no good at all. Lie down and have a rest. Come on, lie down!"

The boy obediently lay down on the bunk. Kholin got out another cigarette, lit it from his fag end, then threw his coat over his shoulders and went out. I noticed that his hands were trembling slightly when he lit his cigarette. I may have had "ragged nerves", but he, too, felt nervous before the operation. I thought he looked sort of absent-minded and worried—observant though he was, he had not noticed the ink stain on the floor. Altogether he looked strange to me. It may have been my imagination, though.

After smoking outside for about ten minutes (obviously chain-smoking) he came back and said to me, "In about an hour and a half we'll be moving. Let's have some supper."

"Where's Katasonov?" the boy asked.

"He's been summoned to the Divisional Commander. He's gone away."

"Gone away!" the boy sat up quickly. "Gone away without coming to see me, without wishing me good luck?"

"He couldn't. It was an urgent call—an alarm," Kholin explained. "I just can't imagine what's happened there. They

know very well we need him."

"He could have dropped in for a minute. A friend, he calls himself," the boy said in a pained, agitated voice. He was genuinely upset.

He lay silent for about half a minute facing the wall, then turned round and asked, "So only us two are going?"

"No, us three. He's going with us," Kholin said with a swift nod in my direction.

I stared at him blankly, then, deciding that he was joking, I smiled.

"You needn't grin and stare at me like a cow at a new gate. I'm talking seriously." He looked grave and even anxious.

I still refused to believe it, but said nothing.

"Didn't you want to go yourself? You asked to. And now you're funkig?" he demanded. His hard contemptuous look was disconcerting.

Suddenly it dawned on me that he was not joking.

"I'm not funkig!" I declared stoutly, trying to collect my wits. "It was so unexpected..."

"Everything in life is unexpected," Kholin said musingly. "I wouldn't take you, believe me, but I can't help it. Katasonov has been called away urgently, you see. For the life of me I can't imagine what's happened there. We'll be back in about two hours," he assured me. "But you've got to make the decision yourself. I don't want you to be throwing the blame on to me in case of anything. If they find out that you went across without permission we'll both get it in the neck. So don't start whimpering afterwards: 'Kholin said, Kholin asked me, Kholin put me up to it!' Bear in mind, you volunteered for the job yourself. Now you did, didn't you? In case of anything I'll get beans, of course, but you won't get off scot-free either. Who are you going to leave in your place?" he asked after a short pause.

"My political assistant—Kolbasov," I said after a moment's reflection. "He's a go-ahead fellow."

"That may be. But I wouldn't have anything to do with him. Political assistants are such sticklers for principle. Before you know where you are they'll slam you into political dispatches, and then may God help you!" Kholin said with a grin, rolling up his eyes.

"Then Gushchin, Commander of the Fifth Company."

"You know best, it's up to you!" Kholin said. "But don't tell him what it's all about. Only the outpost is to know that you're crossing over to the other side. Get me? Considering that the

enemy is on the defensive and no active operations on his part are to be expected, then what can happen? Nothing, really. Besides, you're leaving someone behind, and you won't be gone for more than two hours. Can't you go down to the village, say, if it comes to that? You're only a man, dammit! We'll be back in two hours ... three at the most. It's not worth talking about."

He did not have to tell me all this. Of course, it was a serious matter, and if headquarters got to know about it there would be ructions. But my mind was made up and I refused to think of the consequences. I could think of nothing else but the job in hand.

I had never gone reconnoitring before. True, some three months ago my company had carried out reconnaissance in force with no little success. But what is reconnaissance in force? As a matter of fact, it is an ordinary offensive action, only a brief one, conducted by limited forces.

I had never gone reconnoitring, and naturally, the thought of it was very exciting.

5

Supper was brought to the door. I went outside and collected the mess-tins and teapot myself. I also put on the table an earthenware pot of sour milk and a tin of cornbeef. We supped. The boy and Kholin ate little, and I, too, was off my peck. The boy wore a pined, and somewhat sad expression. The fact that Katasonov had not come to wish him luck seemed to have hurt his feelings pretty strongly. The meal over, he went back to his bunk again.

When the table was cleared Kholin spread out his map and acquainted me with his plans.

The three of us were to cross to the other side, and, leaving the boat in the bushes, move upstream along the water's edge for about six hundred yards until we got to the ravine. Kholin pointed all this out on the map.

"It would be better, of course, to steer straight for the spot, but it's bare bank there and there's nowhere to hide the boat," he explained.

The boy was to slip through the enemy's forward line of defences by way of this ravine, which faced the positions of the Third Battalion.

In the event of his being spotted, Kholin and I, at the water's edge, were to disclose ourselves by sending up red flares—a signal for our artillery to open up—and to divert the enemy, “at all costs” covering the boy's retreat towards the boat. The last to withdraw was to be Kholin.

In the event of the boy being spotted, the “supporting weapons”—two 76-mm gun batteries, a 120-mm mortar battery, two mortar and one machine-gun companies, at our signal, were to blind and stun the enemy by an intense bombardment, laying down a barrage to keep the Germans pinned to the ground in their trenches on both sides of the ravine and farther left and to make safe our retreat towards the boat.

Kholin told me the signals for cooperation with the left bank, went over the details again, then asked: “Everything clear?” “I think so.”

After a pause I spoke to him about what was worrying me. Wouldn't the boy lose his bearings after the crossing, when left alone in the dark, and wasn't he likely to suffer in case of a bombardment?

Kholin explained that “he”—a nod in the boy's direction—together with Katasonov had been studying the enemy bank at the crossing point for several hours from the positions of the Third Battalion and knew every bush, every inch of ground there. As for the bombardment, our artillery had the targets bracketed and would leave a “lane” open up to eighty yards wide.

I was thinking how many unforeseen accidents there might be, but I did not say anything. The boy lay staring wistfully at the ceiling. There was a look of distress in his face, and our conversation might not have concerned him for all the interest he took in it.

I examined the blue lines on the map—the German defences echeloned in depth—and imagining what they looked like in reality, I asked quietly:

“Are you sure you've chosen the best crossing point? Isn't there any sector along the army's front where the enemy's defences are not so dense? Do you mean to say there are no weak spots or gaps in it, say, at the joints?”

Kholin regarded me mockingly with narrowed eyes.

“You fellows in the combat teams don't see an inch beyond your nose. You always think you have the enemy's main forces facing you, while other sectors have only a weak screen just for appearances' sake. Do you think we didn't make our choice

carefully or understand less than you do? If you'd like to know, the whole front is teeming with Germans—there isn't room here to swing a cat. As for the joints, they're wide awake, those Germans, they're nobody's fools. There are no more fools left these days. A solid wall of defence for dozens of miles," Kholin added with a sigh. "Why, man alive, we've been over this dozens of times. These things are not decided offhand, you can take it from me."

He got up, sat down on the bunk beside the boy and in a low voice began instructing him—not for the first time, I suspected.

"In the ravine keep close to the edge. Don't forget, the whole bottom is mined. Stop often and listen. Stop dead! The trenches are patrolled, so you crawl up and wait. As soon as the patrol passes, slip across the trench and keep moving."

I rang up Gushchin, the commander of the Fifth Company, told him that I was leaving him in charge and issued the necessary orders. I hung up and heard Kholin's low voice again:

"You'll wait in Fedorovka. Don't stick your neck out. Be careful whatever you do!"

"It's easier said than done—be careful!" the boy said and there was a note of grimness in his voice.

"I know. But you've got to be. And remember always—you're not alone. Remember, no matter where you may be, I'm thinking of you all the time. And so's the Lieutenant-Colonel."

"And Katasonov went off without seeing me," the boy complained again with childish inconsistency.

"But I told you he couldn't. He was summoned urgently. You know very well that he loves you. You know that he has nobody else in the world. You know it, don't you?"

"I know," the boy mumbled, and there was a catch in his voice. "Still, he could have dropped in..."

Kholin lay down beside him, stroked his soft flaxen hair and whispered something to him. I tried not to listen. I discovered that I had lots of things to attend to and got busy with little result. Then I gave it up and sat down to write a letter to my mother. I knew that all scouts, before going out on an assignment, wrote letters to their near ones. But I felt nervous and could not put my mind to it. After writing half a page with a pencil I tore it up and threw it into the fire.

"Time," Kholin said to me, glancing at his watch and getting up. He put the German suitcase on the bench, pulled the bundle out from under the bunk and undid it, and he and I began to dress.

Over his cotton underwear he put on fine woolen pants and a sweater, then a winter tunic and trousers, and on top of it all a green camouflage cloak. I followed his example. Katasonov's woolen pants were too small for me, and they ripped in the groin. I looked at Kholin irresolutely.

"Never mind!" he said encouragingly. "Go ahead! If you tear them we'll get a new pair."

The camouflage cloak was a near fit, though the trousers were a bit too short. We put on hobnailed German jackboots. I found them rather heavy, but Kholin explained that this was a precaution against leaving telltale footprints on the other side. He tied the cloak strings for me.

Presently we were all ready, with commando knives and F-1 grenades slung from our belts (Kholin also took a heavy antitank grenade, RPG-40), with loaded pistols stuck inside the belts, and with compasses and luminous dial watches hidden up the sleeves of the camouflage cloaks. The flare guns had been examined and Kholin checked the tommy-gun pans.

We were ready, but the boy was still lying with his hands under his head and his eyes turned away from us.

A shabby, padded boy's jacket of a faded brownish hue, a pair of patched dark-grey trousers, a shabby fur cap with earflaps and a pair of broken-down high-boots had been extracted from the large suitcase. Linen underwear, an old jersey and socks—all darned and patched, a bedraggled little knapsack, foot-wrappers and other rags were laid out on the edge of the bunk.

Kholin wrapped the boy's food up in a piece of homespun cloth. There was half a kilogram of sausage, two pieces of salted pork fat, a chunk of rye bread and several crusts of white bread. The sausage was home-made, and the pork was not our army supply, but thin, meagre-looking stuff grey from the dirty salt, and the bread, too, was home-made, baked in the hearth.

I could not help thinking how carefully every little detail had been thought out.

The food had been packed away in the knapsack, but the boy still lay there without stirring. Kholin stole glances at him, and without saying a word, began to examine the flare gun and check the pan fastenings again.

At last the boy sat up on the bunk and with slow unhurried movements began to take off his army uniform. The dark-blue breeches were soiled on the knees and the seat.

"Gum," he said. "Have them cleaned."

"How about sending them to the store and getting a new pair instead?" suggested Kholin.

"No, let them clean this pair."

The boy leisurely put on the civilian clothes. Kholin helped him, then inspected him from all sides. He looked, for all the world, like a homeless ragamuffin, a boy refugee, of whom plenty could be met along the path of the army's offensives.

The boy put away in his pocket a home-made penknife and sixty or seventy German occupation marks in crumpled notes. And nothing more.

"Let's jump," Kholin said to me.

We went through the sound test, jumping up and down several times. The boy jumped, too, although he had nothing on him that could make a noise.

Following an old Russian custom, we sat down before going. We sat for a while in silence. The boy's face had assumed its old expression of unchildlike concentration and inner tension. It was the face I had seen six days ago, when he first came into my dugout.

* * *

After shining the red light of our signalling torches into our eyes to be able to see in the dark better, we made for the boat, I in the lead, and the boy some fifteen paces behind me, with Kholin bringing up the rear.

I was to hail everybody we met on the path and engage him in conversation to enable the boy to hide himself. Nobody else but us was to see him now—Kholin warned me about that in the most forceful terms.

On the right, out of the darkness, came quiet words of command: "Gun crews in position! Action stations!" We could hear twigs snapping among the bushes and men swearing softly as the crews took up their stations at the guns and mortars scattered in the underbrush where my battalion and the Third Battalion were entrenched.

About two hundred men, besides ourselves, were taking part in this operation. They were ready at any moment to screen us by raking the German positions with a deadly hail of gunfire. And none of them suspected that this was anything but a trench raid, as Kholin had been obliged to tell the commanding officers of the supporting units.

The boat was near the outpost. It was a double sentry post,

but on Kholin's instructions I had ordered the outpost commander to leave only one man in the trench—a middle-aged intelligent lance corporal by the name of Dyomin. When we approached the bank Kholin sent me forward to engage the man in conversation while he and the boy slipped past. All these precautions seemed to me unnecessary, but Kholin's taste for secrecy did not surprise me. I knew that all scouts were like that.

"Mind, no comment!" Kholin warned me in a vehement whisper as I walked ahead.

All these warnings at every step annoyed me. After all, I wasn't a boy and had my own wits about me.

Dyomin challenged me from a distance in proper regulation style and I answered back, walking up to the trench. I jumped down and stood in it so that in talking to me he would have his back to the path.

"Have a smoke," I said, offering my cigarettes. He took one.

We squatted, and he began to strike damp matches until he got one burning at last. He offered it to me first, then lighted up himself. In the glow of the match I saw someone sleeping on hay in the shelter recess. The trench cap looked oddly familiar. Inhaling deeply, I switched on my torch without saying a word and saw that the man in the recess was Katasonov. He was lying on his back, his face covered with his cap. Still uncomprehending, I lifted it. An ashen face, gentle as a rabbit's. Over the left eye a neat little hole drilled by a bullet.

"It was such a stupid accident," Dyomin muttered and his voice came to me from far away. "They fixed the boat, and then sat with me, smoking. The captain stood here, talking to me, when the man started to climb out. He no sooner got up than he slid slowly back into the trench, I don't think we even heard any shooting. The captain rushed up to him and shook him, 'Katasonov! Katasonov!' Then we saw that he was dead, killed on the spot. The captain said we were not to breathe a word about it."

Now I understood why Kholin had struck me as looking rather strange after his return from the river.

"Mind, no comment!" I could hear his peremptory whisper from the direction of the river.

It was clear to me now. On no account was the boy to be upset now, when he was going out on his assignment. He was not to know anything.

I clambered out of the trench and slowly descended to the river bank.

The boy was already in the boat, and I got in beside him in the stern with my tommy-gun at the ready.

"Don't fidget," Kholin whispered as he covered us up with a cape. "See the boat doesn't list."

He pushed off, jumped in and took the oars. Glancing at his watch, he waited a little longer, then whistled softly. This was the signal for starting the operation.

The signal was answered immediately by the crack of a rifle in the darkness coming from the big machine-gun trench on the right where the commanders of the supporting units and the artillery observers were.

Kholin swung the boat round and started rowing. The bank disappeared immediately. Cold night wrapped its murky cloak about us.

6

I could feel Kholin's hot measured breathing in my face. He was driving the boat forward with powerful strokes, and soft splashes could be heard as the oars hit the water. The boy sat beside me without stirring, hidden by the cape.

On the right bank ahead of us the Germans, as usual, were sweeping their front-line area with desultory fire and sending up flares to illuminate the terrain. The flashes were not very bright owing to the rain. The wind, too, was blowing against us. So far the weather was favourable.

A burst of tracer bullets rose over the river from our side. The Third Battalion on the left flank was to give such tracer streaks every five to seven minutes to help us find our bearings on the way back.

"Sugar!" whispered Kholin.

We each put two lumps of sugar into our mouths and sucked away at them. This was supposed to sharpen our keenness of sight and hearing.

We must have been in midstream when a machine-gun started chattering in front of us. The bullets whizzed close around us, smacking the water and sending up a hissing spray.

"MG-34," the boy whispered unerringly, snuggling up to me. "Scared?"

"A bit," he confessed in a barely audible voice. "I can't get used to it. Nerves, I suppose. Begging, too—I just can't get used to it. It's sickening!"

I could easily imagine how humiliating it was to this proud touchy boy to have to go about begging.

"By the way," I whispered, reminding myself of something, "we have a Bondarev in our battalion. A Gomel man, too. He isn't a relative of yours by any chance, is he?"

"No, I have no relatives. Only my mother. And I don't know where she is either." His voice shook. "And my name is really Buslov, not Bondarev at all."

"And your first name isn't Ivan?"

"It is. That's my right name."

"Sh!"

Kholin began to row more slowly. Apparently we were nearing the bank. I peered into the darkness until my eyes ached, but all I could make out through the mist of rain were the dull flashes of the flares.

We were barely moving along. In a moment the boat scraped on the sand. Kholin, with swift agile movements, boated the oars, stepped into the water and pulled the boat round stern-on to the bank.

For a couple of minutes we strained our ears, listening. I could hear the raindrops pattering on the water, on the ground and the now sodden cape. I could hear Kholin's regular breathing and the beating of my own heart. But not a single suspicious sound did we catch. Kholin whispered into my ear:

"Ivan stays where he is. Get out and hold the boat."

He vanished in the darkness. Cautiously, I crawled out from under the cape, stepped into the water onto the sandy bank, readjusted my submachine-gun, and took hold of the boat beside me.

"Sit down. I'll cover you with the cape," I whispered, groping for his hand.

"It doesn't matter now," he answered in a low voice.

Kholin suddenly reappeared and coming close up, said in a joyful whisper:

"Okay! The coast is clear!"

It appeared that the bushes at the water's edge where we were to leave the boat were only about thirty paces downstream.

A few minutes later the boat was hidden and we crept along the bank, stooping low and halting from time to time to listen. When a flare shot up nearby we dropped onto the sand under the projecting ledge and lay motionless like dead men. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the boy, his clothes dark with the rain. Kholin and I would return and change, but he...

Suddenly Kholin slackened his pace and taking the boy's hand drew him back into the water. Ahead of us on the sand light shapes appeared. "The bodies of our scouts," I guessed.

"What's that?" the boy asked.

"Jerries," Kholin whispered quickly, hurrying forward with the boy. "A sniper from our side got 'em."

"The dirty skunks! They even strip their own men!" the boy muttered with hatred, glancing back over his shoulder.

It seemed to me as if we had been moving an eternity and that we should have reached the spot long ago. I reminded myself, however, that it was about four hundred yards from the bushes where the boat was hidden to where these bodies lay. And we were still about the same distance from the ravine.

Presently we passed another corpse. It was in an advanced stage of decay and gave off a sickly smell from a distance. A tracer streak pierced the pall of rain behind us. The ravine was somewhere close at hand, but we could not see it. They did not use flares there probably because the whole bottom was mined, and the brow of the ravine was honeycombed with trenches and patrolled. The Germans, apparently, were sure that nobody would poke his nose in here.

This ravine was a good trap to anyone spotted in it, and our plan was based on the boy being able to slip through unobserved.

At last Kholin stopped, and motioning to us to sit down, he went on ahead.

Soon he reappeared and commanded in a whisper, "Follow me!"

We moved on about another thirty paces and squatted on our heels beyond the projecting bank.

"The ravine is straight ahead of us," Kholin said. He turned back the sleeve of his camouflage cloak and glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. "We have another four minutes. How are you feeling?" he whispered to the boy.

"Okay!"

For a time we sat listening, straining our ears in the darkness. There was a smell of decay and dampness. One of the corpses—it was visible in the sand some three yards to our right—evidently served Kholin as a guiding landmark.

"Well, I'll be going," the boy whispered.

"I'll see you off a bit," Kholin suddenly whispered. "Through the ravine. Just a bit."

This was not according to plan at all.

"No!" said the boy. "I'm going alone. You're too big, they'll get you."

"What about me going?" I offered irresolutely.

"Let me see you through the ravine at least," Kholin almost pleaded. "It's clayey there, you'll leave footprints. I'll carry you through."

"I told you, no!" the boy declared obstinately and angrily. "I'm going alone!"

He stood beside me, a thin, pathetic little figure, trembling all over, as it seemed to me, in his shabby old clothes. Or was it just my imagination?

"See you," he said to Kholin after a pause.

"So long!" (I could feel them embracing, and Kholin kissed him.) "Be careful whatever you do! Look after yourself. Wait for us at Fedorovka."

"So long!" the boy turned to me this time.

"See you!" I whispered with deep emotion, finding the boy's slim little hand in the darkness and squeezing it hard.

I wanted to kiss him, but hesitated for a moment. I was terribly agitated, and had been repeating to myself at least a dozen times "So long!" to keep from blurting out "Good-bye!" as I had done six days ago.

Before I could make up my mind to kiss him he had vanished noiselessly in the darkness.

7

Kholin and I crouched close against the bank, the projecting ledge of which hung over our heads, and listened intently. The rain came down in a steady patter, a cold autumn rain that seemed as if it would never end. A chilling dampness drew from the river.

Four minutes had passed since we were left alone, and from the direction in which the boy had gone we caught the sound of footsteps and a muffled conversation in guttural tones.

"Germans?"

Kholin gripped my shoulder, but the warning was unnecessary. I had caught the sounds before he had, and slipped off the safety catch of my tommy-gun. I froze into silence with a grenade clutched in my hand.

The footfalls drew nearer. The mud could now be heard squelching under the feet of several men. My mouth went dry and my heart hammered wildly.

*"Verfluchtes Wetter! Hohl es der Teufel..."**

*"Halte's Maul, Otto! Links halten!"***

They passed so close to us that splashes of cold mud fell upon my face. A moment later, in the light of a flare, we could make out their figures through the mist of rain—tall figures (or so they seemed to me, looking upwards) in helmets over cap comforters, and heavy jackboots similar to those Kholin and I were wearing. Three of them wore ground-sheets, and the fourth a long raincoat glistening with rain and with a belt and holster drawn round the middle. They had tommy-guns slung from their shoulders.

There were four of them—the outpost patrol of an SS regiment, a combat patrol of the German army, past whom had just slipped Ivan Buslov, the twelve-year-old boy from Gomel, who went under the name of "Bondarev" in our intelligence files.

When we saw them in the flickering light of the flare they were on the point of descending to the water's edge within ten paces of us. In the darkness we could hear them jumping down onto the sand, then moving on towards the bushes where our boat lay hidden.

I was finding it harder than Kholin. I was not a scout, and had been fighting since the first months of the war. At the sight of the enemy, a live enemy with a gun, I was seized instantly with that excitement of the trigger-happy fighting man that I had so often experienced before. My first impulse, my first burning, irresistible desire, was to kill that enemy there and then. I'll kill them, I'll lay out the whole bunch with a single burst of my gun—I must have been thinking of nothing else but this as I swung my gun round. But Kholin had been thinking for me. Sensing my movement in the dark he gripped my arm in a vice. Collecting myself, I lowered my tommy-gun.

"They'll spot the boat!" I whispered running my arm, as soon as their footsteps receded.

Kholin was silent.

"We must do something," I whispered again anxiously after a short pause. "If they find that boat..."

"If!" Kholin breathed into my face in a fury. I felt he could have strangled me. "And if they get the boy! What d'you think, we're going to leave him in the lurch? What are you, a cad, a swine or simply a fool?"

* "Accursed weather! What the devil..." (German)—Auth.

** "Hold your tongue, Otto. Keep to the left." (German)—Auth.

"A fool," I whispered after a pause.

"Probably a neurasthenic," Kholin muttered half-musingly. "When the war's over you'll have to take a cure."

I listened tensely, expecting every moment to hear the exclamations of the Germans on discovering the boat. On our left a machine-gun chattered, followed by another directly overhead. In the ensuing silence we could hear the steady patter of the rain. Flares shot up here and there at intervals along the whole line of the bank. They blazed, hissed and faded before they reached the ground.

The sickening smell of putrefaction for some reason grew stronger. I spat and tried to breathe through my mouth, but it didn't help much.

I was dying for a smoke. Never in my life had I yearned so much for one. But all I could do was to pull out a cigarette and smell it by crushing it between my fingers.

Before long we were drenching wet and shivering from the cold, but the rain did not stop for a moment.

"The ground's clayey in the ravine, damn it!" Kholin suddenly whispered. "A good downpour would wash away the footprints."

In thought he was with the boy all the time, and the clayey soil in the ravine, which would preserve the tracks, worried him. He had good reason to worry, I realised. If the Germans discovered those fresh and strikingly small footprints running from the bank through their forward positions they would certainly hunt Ivan down. Maybe with dogs. Trust the SS regiments to have dogs specially trained for hunting people.

I was now chewing the cigarette. It was anything but pleasant, but I went on chewing. Kholin must have heard me, because he asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm dying for a smoke!" I sighed.

"Don't you want your mummy?" Kholin said sarcastically. "I wouldn't mind going home to mummy. Not bad, eh?"

We waited another twenty minutes or so, cold, wet and shivering. My shirt was like an ice pack on my back. The rain gradually turned to snow, and its soft wet flakes covered the sand with a white shroud that melted reluctantly.

"Well, I think he's made it," Kholin murmured in a tone of relief and stood up.

Bending low and keeping close to the projecting ledge we started off towards the boat, stopping every now and then to listen. I was almost positive that the Germans had discovered

the boat and were lying in ambush there among the bushes, but I dared not tell Kholin this for fear of his ridicule.

We crept along the bank in the dark until we ran into the bodies of our scouts. We had moved no more than five paces from them when Kholin stopped, and, pulling me towards him by my sleeve, he whispered into my ear:

"You stay here. I'll go and fetch the boat. There's no need for both of us to run risks. Hail me in German when you hear me coming. Very quietly, though. If I get into trouble, there'll be a racket—so swim across. If I don't come back in an hour, swim across anyway. You can swim there and back five times, can't you?" he said mockingly.

"I can," I confirmed in a trembling voice. "But say you're wounded?"

"Never mind about that. Cut the cackle."

"It would be better to get at the boat not from the bank but by swimming up to it from the river," I remarked rather uncertainly. "Let me do it."

"That's what I'll do, probably. In case of anything, don't you start butting in! If anything happens to you we'll get it hot. Get me."

"Yes, but what if..."

"There are no 'ifs' about it! You're a good chap, Galtsev," he suddenly whispered, "but you're a neurasthenic. And in our line of business that's a terrible thing."

He vanished in the dark, and I was left waiting. I don't know how long I waited—it seemed an eternity. I was freezing and felt so nervous that it did not even occur to me to glance at my watch. Taking care not to make the slightest noise, I worked my arms vigorously and flexed my knees in an attempt to keep warm. Every now and then I stopped to listen.

At last I caught a faint splash, and cupping my hands over my mouth, whispered in German, "Halt. Halt."

"Shut up! Come over here."

Treading gingerly, I took several steps, and the cold water ran into my boots, enfolding my feet in an icy embrace.

"How are things at the ravine—quiet?" was Kholin's first question.

"Yes."

"There, you see. And you were scared," he whispered, pleased. "Get in at the stern end," he commanded, taking my gun from me, and as soon as I got into the boat he started rowing, pulling against the stream.

Seated in the stern, I pulled off my boots and poured the water out of them.

It was snowing heavily, thick snowflakes that melted as soon as they touched the river. From the left bank came another tracer streak. It passed directly overhead. We had to turn round, but Kholin continued to drive the boat upstream.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He pulled hard without answering. I repeated my question.

"Here, take a swig," he said, handing me a small flat flask.

With difficulty I unscrewed the top with freezing fingers and swallowed some of the vodka. It left a pleasant burning sensation in my throat and I felt warm inside, but I could not stop shivering.

"Knock it all back!" Kholin whispered, barely plying the oars.

"What about you?"

"I'll have a drink when we get back. Will you treat me?"

I took another swig, and finding, to my regret, that the flask was empty, I thrust it into my pocket.

"What if he hasn't gone through yet?" Kholin suddenly said.

"What if he's lying there, waiting. I wish I could be with him there now!"

I realised then why we were dawdling. We were opposite the ravine so as to be able, "in case of anything", to land on the enemy bank and come to the boy's rescue. From there, out of the darkness, long bursts of machine-gun fire swept the river at regular intervals. Every time the whistling bullets smacked the water alongside the boat I flinched. It was probably impossible to spot us in this darkness, through the pall of wet snow, but it was a none the less damnably unpleasant experience to find oneself exposed to the enemy's fire on an open patch of water where one could not dig in or seek shelter. Kholin tried to cheer me up, whispering:

"Only a fool or a coward can stop crazy bullets like these. Bear that in mind!"

Katasonov had been no fool, nor coward—I was sure of that, but I did not say anything.

"That M.O. of yours is a peach!" he resumed after a while, evidently wishing to distract me.

"N-n-not bad," I concurred through chattering teeth, least of all thinking of that medical officer. If I was thinking of anything it was the aid post's warm dugout and the stove. That lovely iron stove!

Three more tracers were given on the left bank, that desirable

bank, which spelt safety and warmth. They were signalling to us to return, but we were still lingering on the water closer to the right bank.

"I daresay he's made it," Kholin said at last, swinging the boat round with vigorous strokes.

He took his bearings and steered with remarkable accuracy in the darkness. We made for the vicinity of the large machine-gun trench on the right flank of my battalion, where the outpost platoon commander was.

They were waiting for us, and challenged in a low, commanding voice: "Halt! Who goes there?" I gave the password. They recognised my voice, and in a moment we stepped ashore.

I was completely done up, and although I drank a full tumbler of vodka I was still shivering and could barely drag my freezing feet. Trying to keep my teeth from chattering, I gave orders for the boat to be pulled in and camouflaged, and we started down the bank, accompanied by squad commander Sergeant Zuyev, my favourite, happy-go-lucky man of reckless bravery. He was walking in the lead.

"But where's the prisoner, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?" he suddenly asked, turning round.

"What prisoner?"

"They said you were going out to get a prisoner."

Kholin, who was walking behind, pushed me aside and strode up to Zuyev.

"You'd better keep your tongue prisoner! Get me?" he said grimly, clipping his words. I even thought he clapped his heavy hand down on Zuyev's shoulder or maybe gripped his collar. Kholin was like that—he was much too blunt and quick-tempered. "Keep your tongue between your teeth!" he repeated threateningly. "You'll find it healthier! And now go back to your post!"

Zuyev was still well within earshot when Kholin said in a deliberately loud, stern voice:

"You've got too many tongue-waggers in your battalion, Galtsev! In our line of business that's a terrible thing."

He slipped his arm through mine in the darkness, squeezed my elbow and whispered mockingly:

"You're a fine one, too! Fancy chucking your battalion to go sneaking off to capture a prisoner!"

Back in the dugout we got the stove blazing with the aid of spare mortar charges, then stripped naked and rubbed ourselves down with towels.

Putting on dry underwear, Kholin slipped his coat over his shoulders and sat down at the table where he closely examined the map he had spread out on it. He seemed to have wilted the moment he came into the dugout. He looked tired and worried.

I put some food on the table—a tin of cornbeef, pork fat, a billycan with pickled cucumbers, bread, sour milk and a flask of vodka.

"Oh, I wish I knew how he's getting on there!" Kholin suddenly exclaimed, getting up. "I wonder what's the matter?"

"Why?"

"That patrol—on the other side—it was due to pass half an hour later. Understand? That means, either the Germans have changed their outpost routine, or else we've made a mess of it. In either case the kid may pay for it with his life. I can't understand—we had it all worked out to the minute."

"But he's made it. We were waiting so long—close on an hour—but everything was quiet."

"Made what?" Kholin said irritably. "If you'd like to know he's got to cover over thirty miles. About thirteen of them he has to make before sunrise. At every step he may run into the Germans. And how many unforeseen things may happen! Ah, well, talking about it won't help!" He removed the map from the table. "Come on!"

I poured vodka into two mugs.

"No clinking, please," Kholin warned me, taking one of the mugs.

We sat for several moments in silence with raised mugs.

"Ah, Katasonov, Katasonov!" sighed Kholin, scowling at me and adding with a catch in his voice, "He's nothing to you! But he saved my life, he did."

He tossed off the vodka at a single gulp, took a sniff at a piece of rye bread and demanded, "Some more!"

I drank my own, and refilled the mugs—his full to the brim and mine just a little. Picking up his mug he turned towards the bunk on which lay the suitcase with the boy's things in it, and uttered quietly:

"Here's to your coming back and never going out again. Here's to your future!"

We drained the mugs and started on the snacks. Unquestionably, we were both thinking of the boy at that moment. The sides and top of the stove were red-hot. We had come back and were sitting here warm and safe, while he was out there, in the enemy's lines, crawling through the snow and murk with death lurking at every step.

I had never had any special love for children, but this boy—though I had met him only twice—had grown so near and dear to me that I could not think of him without a pang.

I did not drink any more. But Kholin drained his third mug in utter silence. Soon he got tipsy, and sat with a brooding air, glancing at me gloomily with inflamed eyes.

"Been fighting over two years, you say?" he muttered, lighting a cigarette. "So have I. But we haven't looked death in the face, at least not the way Ivan has! You have a battalion, a regiment, a whole army behind you. But he's all on his own!" Kholin shouted this out in a flash of anger. "A child! And you grudged him that lousy knife!"

8

"Grudged him!" No, I couldn't, I had no right to give that knife to anyone. It was a keep-sake, the only memory of a dead friend.

I kept my word, however. There was a handy man, a fitter, working in the divisional ordinance workshop, an elderly sergeant from the industrial Urals. Last spring he had carved a handle for Kostya's knife, and I now asked him to make a similar one and set it on a brand-new commando knife which I gave him. I not only asked him, I brought a box of tools—a vice, drills, chisels of German make—spoils of war. I did not need them, and he was delighted as a child.

He made a splendid job of that handle, and the knife could be distinguished from Kostya's only by the absence of notches on the blade and the owner's initials "K.K." carved on the knob. I pictured to myself how pleased the boy would be to get a real commando knife with such a fine handle. I understood him. I was out of my teens myself not so very long ago.

I wore the knife on my belt, figuring on handing it over to Kholin or Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov as soon as I met them—I could hardly expect to meet Ivan myself. Where could he be now, I often wondered, thinking of him.

These were hectic days. The divisions of our army were forcing the Dnieper, and as the Informbureau communiqués reported, "were waging successful battles to widen the bridge-head on the right bank".

I hardly made any use of the knife, not counting the hand-to-hand fight when I used it on that burly corporal from Hamburg who would otherwise have cracked my head open with his spade.

The Germans put up a desperate resistance. After eight days of heavy offensive battles we received orders to take up a defensive position. It was then, on a bright cold day early in November, just on the eve of the revolutionary holiday, that I met Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov.

A man of medium height with a large head on a thick-set body, wearing a greatcoat and fur cap with earflaps, he walked up and down the roadside slightly dragging his right foot, which had been wounded in the Finnish campaign. I recognised him from afar as soon as I came out on the edge of the wood where the remnants of my battalion stood. I could say "my" battalion now with full right, as I had been confirmed in my appointment as battalion commander on the eve of the forcing.

It was quiet in the wood. The ground was covered with hoarfrosted leaves, and the place smelt of horse dung and urine. A Cossack corps had taken part in the break-through on this section, and the wood had been their bivouac site. The smell of horses and cows was associated in my mind since childhood with that of new milk and hot bread fresh from the oven. It brought back memories of the country, where, as a child, I used to spend every summer with my grandmother, a dried-up little old lady who simply doted on me. It was not long ago, really, but it seemed so far away now, far away and never-to-be-repeated, like everything pre-war.

Childhood memories left me as soon as I emerged from the wood. The road was cluttered with German vehicles, burnt, wrecked or simply abandoned. The German dead lay strewn about the roadway and in the ditches in a variety of attitudes. Grey mounds of corpses could be seen everywhere in the trench-gashed field. In the roadway, some two hundred feet from where Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov stood, his driver and interpreter—the latter with the shoulder-straps of a lieutenant—were busy doing something in the German armoured carrier. Four others, whose ranks I could not make out, were searching among the trenches on the other side of the road. The Lieuten-

ant-Colonel was shouting something to them, but I could not make out what it was owing to the wind.

As I approached, Gryaznov turned to me a swarthy, pock-marked, fleshy face and cried out in a gruff voice that sounded surprised or pleased, "Hullo, Galtsev, you're alive?"

"Alive and kicking, as you see!" I smiled. "How do you do?"

"How do you do? Glad to see you!"

I shook his proffered hand, then looking round to make sure there was no one else about, I asked:

"Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, may I ask a question—has Ivan come back?"

"Ivan? Ivan who?"

"That boy, Bondarev."

"What's it to you whether he's back or not?" Gryaznov said with a frown, studying me with black shrewd eyes.

"Well, considering that I helped him across..."

"What's that got to do with it! Everyone knows what he's supposed to know. That's a law for the army, and especially for intelligence."

"But I'm not asking this officially. It's purely personal. Will you please do me a favour? I promised to give him this..." I undid my coat, took the knife off my belt, and handed it to Gryaznov. "Please give this to him. If you only knew how he wanted it!"

"I know, Galtsev, I know," the Lieutenant-Colonel sighed, taking the knife and examining it. "Not bad. But I've seen better ones. He has about a dozen of these knives, if not more. He's collected a boxful. Has a passion for them, you know. He's at that age. A kid, what can you expect! All right, I'll give it to him when I see him."

"Then ... he hasn't come back?" I said agitatedly.

"He came back, and went away again. Went all by himself."

"What do you mean?"

Gryaznov frowned and stared into the distance in silence. Then in a deep, husky voice he said quietly:

"We were sending him to school and he seemed to agree. In the morning we were to have his papers ready for him, but during the night he went away. I don't blame him. It's a long story and there's no need for you to know it." He turned his large pock-marked face to me. It was stern and thoughtful. "The hatred hasn't burnt out of him yet. He can't find any peace. Maybe he'll come back, but most likely he'll join the partisans. I advise you to forget about him, and remember this in future—

never ask questions about our men behind the lines. The less said about them and the less people there are in the know, the longer they live. You met him just by chance, and—excuse me saying it—you're not supposed to know anything about him. So please remember in future—you know no Bondarev, there is no such person, and you've never seen or heard anything about him. And you've helped no one across! So there are no questions to ask. Get me?"

And I asked no more questions. There was no one to ask them of, for that matter. Kholin was killed shortly afterwards during a scout mission. His party ran into a German ambush in the gloom of a grey pre-dawn and Kholin was hit in both legs by a machine-gun burst. He ordered all his men to withdraw and kept the enemy at bay till the last. And when he was captured he exploded an antitank grenade. As for Lieutenant-Colonel Gryaznov, he was transferred to another army and I never met him again.

But naturally, I could not forget about Ivan, as the Lieutenant-Colonel had advised me. I often thought of the little scout, but never expected to meet him or hear what happened to him.

9

During the fighting at Kovel I was badly wounded and became a "limited service man", allowed to be employed only as a non-combatant in unit staffs of rearward services. I had to say goodbye to my battalion and my division. During the last six months of the war I worked as an interpreter in Corps Intelligence on the same First Byelorussian Front but in another army.

When the battle for Berlin started I and two other officers were detailed to one of the operational groups that had been specially organised for the seizure of German archives and documents.

Berlin surrendered on May 2 at 3 p.m. Those historic minutes found our group in the centre of the city, in a half-demolished building in Prince Albrecht-Strasse, only recently the headquarters of Gestapo, the German secret police. As was to be expected, most of the documents had been removed or destroyed. Only on the third, top, floor did our men discover filing cabinets and a huge card-index with their contents intact. This find was announced with a joyous shout from the window by the Tommy-guns who were the first to enter the building.

"Comrade Captain, there's a truckload of papers out there in the yard!" a broad-shouldered dumpy little soldier reported running up breathless.

The vast yard of the Gestapo, now littered with stones and debris, had been used as a garage for dozens or maybe hundreds of cars and lorries. A few of these remained, wrecked by explosions. I glanced around: a dugout shelter, dead bodies, bomb holes, in a corner of the yard sappers with a mine-detector.

Near the gate stood a tall lorry with gas-generators. The tail-board was down, and inside, covered with a tarpaulin, was the body of an officer in the black uniform of the S.S. and thick files and dossiers tied up in packages.

The soldier clambered into the lorry and dragged the packages to the edge. I cut the ersatz-strings with my commando knife.

These were documents of the S.F.P.—the Secret Field Police—of the Army Group Centre, dating to 1943/44. Reports on punitive "actions", agents' messages, search orders, identification records, copies of various dispatches and secret reports, all telling their story of heroism and cowardice, of people shot and of people who had avenged them, of people who had been caught and people who had not. To me these documents were of special interest. Mozir and Petrikov, Rechitsa and Pinsk—before me rose all those familiar places in Gomel and Polesye districts through which our front line had passed.

The files contained no few registration forms with brief information concerning the people whom the secret police were searching for, or had hunted down. Some of these forms had photographs attached to them.

"Who is this?" The soldier standing in the lorry poked a stubby finger at the different forms, asking me: "Comrade Captain, who is this?"

Without answering him, in a sort of daze, I turned over sheet after sheet, going through one file after another, oblivious of the rain that was wetting us. Yes, on that glorious day of our victory it was raining in Berlin, a thin, cold drizzle from a grey sky. The weather did not break until late in the afternoon, when the sun peeped out through the smoke and mist.

After the shattering noise of ten days' furious fighting silence now reigned, broken here and there by tommy-gun bursts. Fires raged in the centre of the city, and whereas, in the suburbs, where there were many gardens, the scent of the riotous lilac overpowered all other smells, here there was a strong smell of burning and black smoke drifted over the ruins.

"Carry it all into the building!" I said at last, pointing to the packages; while I automatically opened the file I was holding in my hand. I glanced at it, and my heart stood still. Looking at me from the photograph pasted to the form was Ivan Buslov.

I recognised him at once by those high cheekbones and the great wide-set eyes—I had never seen eyes set so wide apart.

He wore a scowl, as he did that time I first met him in the dugout on the Dnieper. A bruise made a dark patch on his left cheek.

The form with the photograph on it had not been filled in. With a sinking heart I turned it over—pinned to the bottom was a sheet of paper with a typewritten text, the copy of a special report from the Chief of the Secret Field Police of the Second German Army. Here it is:

"No... Town of Luninets. 26.12.43. Secret.

"To the Chief of Field Police, Army Group Centre.

"On December 21, 1943, Yefim Titkov of the auxiliary police detected, and, after two hours' observation, detained a Russian schoolboy of 10 or 12 in the restricted area of our 23rd Army Corps near the railway line, who was lying in the snow and watching the movements of military trains on the Kalinkovich-Klinsk section.

"The unknown detainee (it was later established that he had given his name as 'Ivan' to a local inhabitant Maria Semina) offered a fierce resistance, biting Titkov's hand, and it was only with the assistance of Corporal Wintz, who happened upon the scene, that the boy was taken to the field police...

"...it has been established that 'Ivan' spent several days and nights in the lines of the 23rd Corps ... went about begging ... slept in an abandoned threshing-barn and in sheds. His fingers and toes were frostbitten and partially affected by gangrene...

"On being searched 'Ivan' was found to have in his pockets a handkerchief and 110 (one hundred and ten) occupation marks. No material evidence was found that he belonged to the partisans or engaged in spying... Distinctive marks: a large birthmark down the middle of the spine, and a scar over the left shoulder-blade—the result of a bullet wound.

"Interrogated with all thoroughness and strictness in the course of four days and nights by Major von Bissing, Ober-Lieutenant Klammt and Sergeant-Major Stammer, 'Ivan' gave no evidence that would have helped to establish his identity or ascertain what reasons he had for being in the restricted area and in the lines of the 23rd Army Corps.

"During the interrogations he bore himself in a defiant manner, and did not conceal his hostile attitude towards the German army and the German empire.

"In accordance with the Instructions of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief dated November 11, 1942, the detainee was shot on 25.12.43 at 6.55 a.m.

"...a reward of 100 (one hundred) marks was issued to Titkov, as per receipt attached..."

1957 .